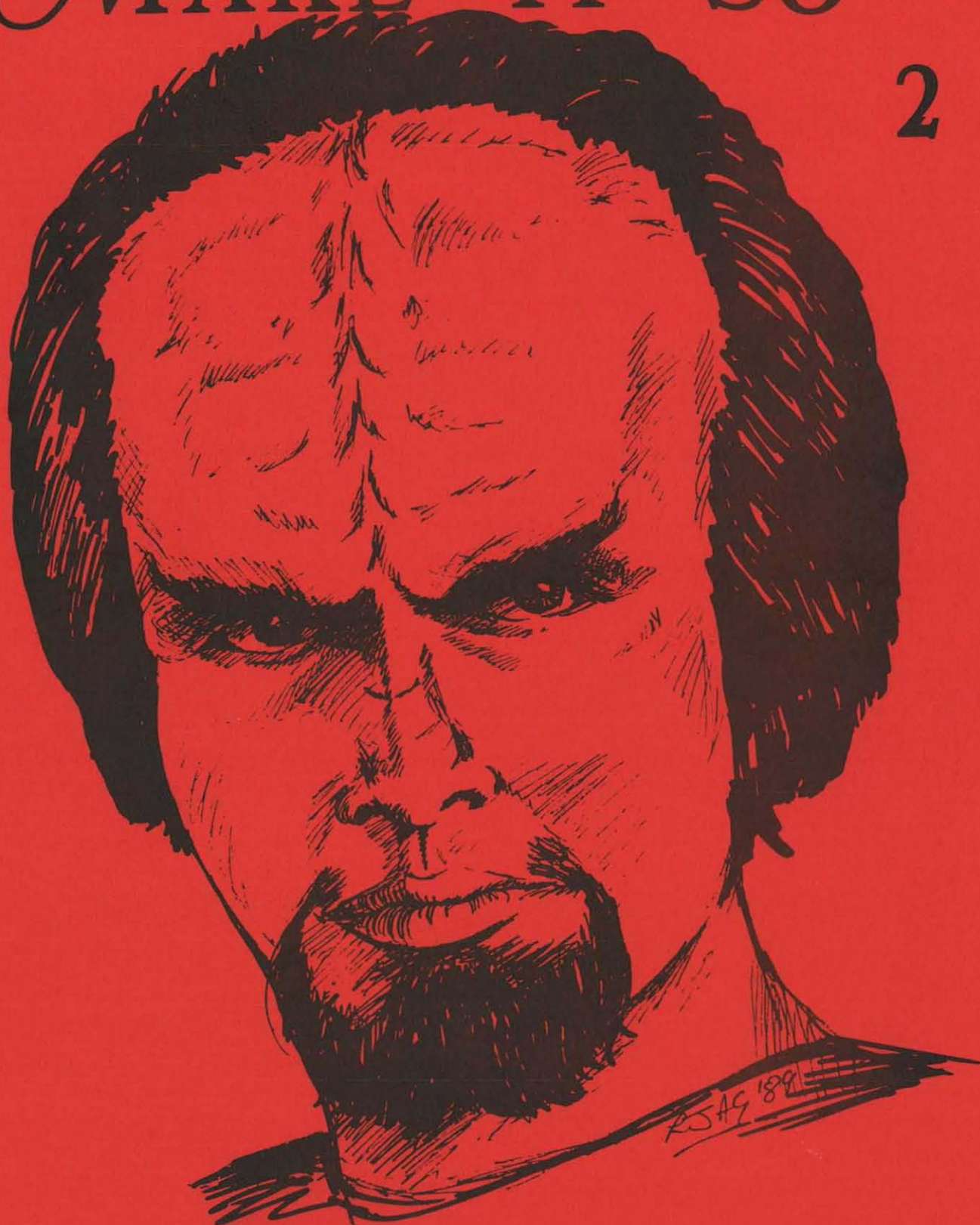


Scotpress

MAKE IT SO

2



Star Trek —
The Next Generation

CONTENTS

Reasons for Leaving	by Karen Sparks	P 3
Like a Lady	by Linda Wood	P 11
Chasing Clouds	by Lorraine Goodison	P 13
Departed Friend	by Karen Sparks	P 16
A Twist in Time	by Jacqueline Comben	P 18
Return	by Jacqueline Comben	P 36
An Ignominious End	by L.G.	P 41
Replay	by Scott Carrick	P 48
It's Over	by Sue Meek	P 81
Say Goodbye to it All	by Lorraine Goodison	P 82
Captain's Nightmare	by Lesley McCartney	P 90
Link	by Teresa Abbott	P 92

Artwork - Lorraine Goodison, Cover
Nola Frame-Gray, P 12, 40, 91

A Scotpress publication

Editors - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini
Typing - Sheila Clark
Proofreading - Janet Quarton, Sheila Clark & Valerie Piacentini
Printing of Masters - Janet Quarton
Printing - Urban Print
Distracting - Shona and Cindy

MAKE IT SO 2 is put out by Scotpress and is available from -

Sheila Clark
6 Craigmill Cottages
Strathmartine
by Dundee
Scotland

(C) Scotpress August 1989. All rights are reserved to the writers and artists. Anyone wishing to reprint any of the material herein is asked to obtain permission in writing first. It is understood that this applies only to original material herein, and that no attempt is made to supersede any rights held by Paramount, NBC, BBC or any other holders of copyright in STAR TREK material.

Scotpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

Hello, and welcome to this second issue of MAKE IT SO. It's encouraging that so many writers are taking pen in hand to produce stories set in this incarnation of Star Trek.

Lorraine Goodison makes a welcome return to Trek writing with no fewer than three stories, as does Sue Meek with a poem; Jacqueline Comben is known to members of BSFR and Lesley McCartney is known in fandom but both are new to our pages; and several new contributors make their appearance - Scott Carrick, one of the few male writers in fandom, provides the longest story in the zine, while Nola Frame-Gray's cartoons give us the chance to break new ground.

We don't often feature a story - however, for the second time in two issues of Make it So we have a feature story. In this issue we're featuring Teresa Abbott's story LINK. It may seem a little unusual to feature a 9-page story, but this is my game and I make the rules. I loved this story on sight, and when I turned to the last page I had a gut reaction that left me nearly in tears - and it's a rare story indeed that does that to me.

We already have some material for the next issue, but as always we need more. No death of main characters (except Yar), no stories about other ships (unless they feature one of the characters on an earlier ship), no adult themes. These are, after all, 'The voyages of the Starship Enterprise...'

Submissions can be sent to

Sheila Clark
6 Craigmill Cottages
Strathmartine
by Dundee
Scotland

or Valerie Piacentini
20 Ardrossan Rd
Saltcoats
Ayrshire
Scotland

REASONS FOR LEAVING

by

Karen Sparks

Beverly Crusher couldn't concentrate on the letter she was trying to draft to her old friend Kate. She'd just written the same paragraph twice, and it hadn't been that interesting to start with. She stood up, and then stared blankly at the pad which had fallen from her lap to the floor. She bent to pick it up and placed it on the table.

Two days. She began to wander restlessly around her quarters. It didn't take that long to read a resignation. Was it really a matter of such supreme indifference to him? Tears of humiliation burned behind her eyes. She paused before the mirror, and loathed her reflection. She looked pale and her eyes were shadowed with fatigue - sleep had been elusive, these past weeks, with the painful decisions to be made haunting her nights. A strand of auburn hair was twisted absently around a finger, and then the mirror-image jumped as the door-chime sounded, intruding on her troubled thoughts. She frowned. One of Wesley's friends, no doubt, who hadn't got the message about the change of venue for the birthday party they were all attending.

"Come," she called listlessly.

The doors slid back, and the reflection of the figure framed in the opening caused her to start, and colour to flood her fair skin. She caught back the impulse to spin towards him and turned only slowly to face him. There was none of the relief she had thought to feel at his arrival - unaccountably her stomach began churning in anxiety as it had used to in the long-ago days of taking medical exams. Her heart was pounding so hard it felt like it would burst.

"Good evening, Captain. Won't you come in?" she heard herself say, for all the world as if she was some party hostess greeting a guest. It had been a long time since she had hosted a party. She smoothed suddenly clammy hands over the folds of her silky skirt.

He returned her greeting automatically and she saw that he did not look very much more comfortable than she felt as he stepped hesitantly into the unfamiliar territory of her quarters. He could not restrain a half-glance over his shoulder as the doors closed behind him, and she supposed bitterly that he was wondering if anyone had seen him enter. She consoled herself lamely that at least he was here, voluntarily, so perhaps it was not so unimportant to him as she'd begun to despair.

Conflicting storms of emotion raged within her at the sight of his thoughtful regard of her and she turned away to hide her expression. She should be glad he had not brought Troi along, she told herself sourly, for this matter which was undoubtedly nothing more to him than routine ship's business.

"Please sit down, Captain." She moved to the cabinet. "Can I get you a drink, perhaps?"

"Thank you, no." The fabric of the easy chair rustled faintly as he settled into it.

"You won't mind if I do." She dropped ice into a glass with unnecessary noise to cover the silence in the room. Her hand was shaking as she poured her drink as slowly as she could. Her delaying tactics failed; she found she still could not turn to face him. His eyes would look into hers and she would be able to hide nothing from him. All resolve would be lost.

"Beverly, I think we should talk."

His quietly spoken words only increased her inner turmoil. She took a sip of the amber liquid. It burned her throat. "What do you think we should talk about?" she asked hoarsely.

He hesitated. "I wasn't sure what you wanted me to do. I thought you would come to me to talk about it - that's why I waited until now."

Oh, no. You had to come to me. If you hadn't cared enough to do that, I couldn't go through with it.

His expressive voice sounded again in the room, a little embarrassed this time. "Look, why don't you sit down? It's not easy talking to the back of your head like this." His tone acknowledged the fact that they were both off duty and this was her domain; he could not order her to do anything.

The doctor only leaned a little more heavily on the cabinet for support. *Tonight, she vowed, you may not have the advantage of your skill at reading people. You will know only what I choose to tell you. It must be that way.* She picked up the glass and watched the floating ice-cubes jostle against each other. One large lump in the middle prevented two smaller ones at opposite sides from ever touching each other; they could only float round and round the obstruction, clinking against the glass and never getting any closer. *We are like that, she thought dumbly, and I don't even know what the obstruction is - the Enterprise? - Jack's death? - or just all the little things piled up?*

She remembered he had asked her to sit down, realised he must be watching her. She put the glass down again, but still could not turn. Politely, she said, "I am quite comfortable here, for the moment." *Really, this isn't going at all like any of the rehearsals I'd planned in my mind during those endless nights. We didn't waste time discussing such trivialities as who would sit where....*

"Please, Beverly, tell me why you're leaving." His voice was quiet and encouraging. Her breath caught in her throat and she fought against the yearning to face him and let him read it in her eyes. This was the power of his command; the persuasive, almost hypnotic quality in his voice that made people want to do the things he wanted them to do. Anger warred with longing, and a thread of hysteria surfaced in her mind. *You have to ask, Jean-Luc? If you really don't know I wouldn't have any idea how to start telling you. You just can't be that blind.*

"I thought you knew," she said, bleakly pleased through her pain that her voice sounded so calm, so unemotional and believable. "I have been offered an excellent promotion. It's not something I should turn down."

Silence in the room. Then a delicately-phrased question that tore at her defences.

"Are you going because you want to go, or because you don't want to stay?"

Her vision blurred and the room lurched around her. She clutched at the glass as if it was a lifeline and cold liquid slopped onto her fingers. Damn you! her mind yelled, what do you think? You don't really want to know, I know you don't: the truth would complicate your life and you wouldn't know what to do. Don't push me, and you won't have to know. Trust your doctor, Jean-Luc, when she tells you you'll regret it if you spoil her plan. There was hardly enough space in her mind to contain all the anguished accusations flooding into it. I'm leaving because I love you too much to stay! I didn't mean it to be this way when I joined the ship. I didn't know that I would fall in love with you, or that you never would with me. Oh, I could tell you felt uncomfortable with me when I first arrived but I understood that - you thought I blamed you for Jack's death. I tried to show you I didn't but I realised you still held yourself far more responsible for the accident than I ever had. I reminded you of the loss of your best friend simply by my presence. That was always between us right from the start.

I can't remember the exact moment when I first knew I was in love with you. It was probably born of admiration of that special skill which is so much a part of you, of bringing out the best in people. It works right down through the ranks even to the youngest of the children who all adore you without knowing why, and even though you don't know what to do with their affection for you. As the ship's doctor I delight in the care you show to each of your bridge crew, that unique family of which you are head - your gentle restraint of Tasha's impetuosity and Worf's natural aggression, your understanding of Data's and Geordi's needs to be treated like all the others, your respect and compassion for Deanna's gift which is also her burden, your trust and belief in Riker. But as Beverly I am deeply jealous of it and it hurts inside every time I see it for you show no such concern for my feelings.

The first time I realised I loved you might have been when I saw the passion with which you defended your crew and Starfleet against Q's threats and ridicule, or perhaps when you gave me your word - and kept it - that you would not allow my son to be executed on Rubicam Three. Or it might have been watching you writhe in the unimaginable pain caused by the Ferengi mind-control device that pushed the scanner readings off the scale, and with all my training and experience I was powerless to help you, more helpless than I have ever felt. (If I had been able to stop your pain, the way a ship's doctor should have been able to, would it have made any difference?)

I began to understand that you could not love me, Jean-Luc, but even that I came to terms with and was content merely to be near you, to watch over your health and serve under your command because, you see, I thought (we all thought) you were one of those well-documented but rare beings, a starship captain who truly did not want or need the love of a woman, to whom his ship and crew were Everything.

Thinking that, I did not even blame you for your remoteness on Mynos when we were trapped together in that cavern. I did not blame you when you would not hold me to keep me warm and ease my fear (and it was a well-founded fear, Jean-Luc, for I knew the extent of my

injuries and I nearly bled to death), nor when you would not even stay nearby to reassure me with your words. When you began to roam around the cavern, doing anything rather than have to be near me, I told myself it was because you were showing your concern in a practical way, in trying to find us a way out - and of course I knew you were worried about the rest of the away team who were under attack from those machines. Not because you didn't care. I didn't want to think you didn't care. Even so, that day marked the beginning of the end of my dream, for if you could not show concern when I might have died, when would you ever?

And then all our personal feelings were ripped to shreds by the horror of Tasha's death. She never had an enemy - everyone who knew her loved her. I know that you did, especially, quietly, like the daughter you never had. I knew how protective you felt towards her, and guessed the hard time you sometimes had with the knowledge that it was her job to protect you, that she would always plunge into danger ahead of you. It is a tribute to Tasha (that neither she nor you will ever know, and you at least would not understand even if you did) that I was truly never jealous of your love for her, because after the brutality of her childhood and adolescence she deserved all the love in the universe for the rest of her life and even I could not begrudge her that. You would not let anyone see your grief when she was killed, although we all shared it.

I shall never forget racing against time to save her in sickbay; your worst nightmare, (and mine too, for different reasons) coming to pass. I was peripherally aware of you watching my frantic efforts, and I wanted so desperately to save her life, almost as much for your sake as for hers. But you turned your back on me and went over to stand with Data and Riker, and I failed; I could not save her and I had to tell you she was dead and it was the hardest thing I have ever done - until now. You turned around, then, shocked, and I saw accusation in your eyes as you looked at me and I wished it had been me who had died. I know there was nothing more I could have done, and it hurts that you don't trust me enough to have that certainty too. But even knowing doesn't stop my feelings of guilt, and the unconscious longing discernible in every fibre of your being when you look over at the empty bridge station where she used to stand is like a constant reproach to me, although I know you don't mean it as such.

And the final torment came only weeks ago when my carefully-constructed, fragile hypothesis of your attitude towards me was shattered, when the feeble strands of evidence I had woven together into a material reason for being able to bear your not loving me was shown to be the veil of self-delusion it really was. As long as I believed you didn't love any woman all the other things didn't hurt quite so much. But then Janice Mannheim came aboard and everything changed. I had often imagined seeing that tenderness soften your features, Jean-Luc, but only inspired there by me, and it was only ever a dream I could not expect to be fulfilled. And the day that I finally saw it there it was not for me, and the memory of it is almost too painful to bear. I hated her, of course, because the place she holds in your heart is the place I would choose above all others. She does not deserve such a privilege for she is married and she loves her husband and he loves her and it is not fair. I saw your pain and conflict when she left with her husband, and I know that if you have not forgotten her in the 22 years since you last saw her you will surely not in the next 22. If only I could inspire such faithfulness in you! I think I even hated you for a little, then, for deceiving me all this time, although in my more rational moments I know you are not responsible for my fantasies and

you can't help not loving me any more than I can help loving you. But oh, Jean-Luc! I would forgive you everything and it would make what I have to do so much easier if only you would look at me, just once, the way you looked at her!

Only when the doctor opened her eyes did she realise they had been closed. She couldn't remember how she came to be sitting in an armchair when she had been so determined to stay standing, but such minor details fled before the wonder of the scene before her that made her eyes widen and her heart warm. The unknowing cause of all her anguish was kneeling beside her chair, his elegantly-contoured profile bent over her hand which was, incredibly, clasped in both of his. She felt like crying and wished the moment could last forever.

He looked up suddenly, aware of her gaze, and she cherished the concern on his face even as it faded to a more neutral expression. He smiled slightly in a way that melted all her anger against him and strengthened her resolve to spare him all she could.

"Are you feeling better?"

"I'm all right." Then, hazily, "What happened?"

He released her hand for her to inspect the cuts he had been pressing a pad against. "You broke the glass - don't you remember?"

Her hand hurt. She glanced over her shoulder at the glass fragments on the floor by the cabinet. "No."

"And then you seemed to pass out." His unspoken question hung in the air.

"I didn't have any lunch," she said in hasty explanation. It also happened to be the truth. "I shouldn't have been drinking on an empty stomach. Foolish of me."

She saw relief on his face, and then a little smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as he resumed his seat opposite her. "That's all right, then - for a moment it occurred to me that my CMO might not be able to stand the sight of blood. I thought I'd have spotted that before now!"

My CMO. She savoured his possessive use of her title, then sternly pushed the pleasure it gave her for later reflection. She had a job to do, and he had given her the precious gift of enough strength to do it. She looked up from her apparently absorbed study of her hand's condition. He was watching her again, but this time she was able to meet his eyes.

"You haven't answered my question," he reminded her quietly.

"Oh, haven't I?" she asked, as if she really couldn't remember. She smiled at him and took a deep breath. "I know you couldn't possibly understand that anyone might actually want to transfer off the Enterprise, Jean-Luc, but I want to go back to Earth. I want to have solid ground under my feet again and feel the wind in my hair and breathe fresh air that hasn't already been recycled a thousand times." She even impressed herself by the sincerity in her voice, and her smile became genuine at the sheer bafflement on his face.

"But - the holodecks - " he began.

"Oh, holodecks!" she gestured dismissively. "I can never forget there's a door, even though it can't be seen, and a switch that will turn it all off. You can't walk for miles on a holodeck - not unless you go round and round in circles."

"Big circles," the captain protested faintly. "Very big circles." Then, curiously, "I didn't know you liked walking."

"I like to have the option," she returned with some asperity. Thinking back over her words she realised with surprise that it would be nice to get back to those things. She must concentrate on that and not what she would be giving up. She continued briskly, "I've run out of things to organise on this ship - I'd like to see what I can do with the Surgeon-General's office. It really is an excellent opportunity for me."

"I know that, and I wouldn't dream of standing in the way of your promotion," he assured her. "As long as - " He hesitated, looked at the floor, brushed an imaginary speck of lint off his sleeve, finally returning his gaze almost pleadingly to her face. "As long as you're not going because of anything I've done."

She returned to dabbing at a still-bleeding laceration on her palm for a moment. *Nothing you've done, beloved Jean-Luc, but everything you haven't done.* The memory of his earlier concern soothed her mental cry of despair and her voice was steady as she said, with the touch of mockery he would expect, "Oh, the arrogance of the male species!" She lifted her head to look into his eyes and lie to him. "My leaving has nothing to do with you."

She saw him relax into the chair as if some tremendous weight had been lifted from his shoulders. This man was not used to being lied to and she knew with a kind of bleak pride that she had been convincing enough for him not to doubt her. She bowed her head, allowing a length of hair to fall forward and hide her face from him momentarily while she struggled against a sudden wave of panic. She won the fight. This was what she wanted; this lie was a gift he would never know about, the only thing she would ever be able to do for him. She became aware that he was saying something.

"....can only wish you every success and happiness, Beverly. We'll miss you."

"We", not "I". She cleared her throat. "Thank you."

"If there's anything I can do for you....?" Picard offered politely.

She shifted in her seat. "Actually - yes, there might be something."

He spread his hands expansively, eyebrows raised enquiringly.

The rest of the price to pay. Her words escaped in a rush. "If Wes should decide not to come with me - "

"What?" Picard jerked upright in his chair like a man awakened suddenly from sleep.

His incredulous exclamation startled her and she thought back over her words, wondering what had been so unexpected. " - would you mind keeping an eye on him for me?" she finished lamely.

"But - " His mouth opened, then closed. Then it opened again. "You mean he's not going with you? You're just *leaving* him here?"

The doctor bristled with indignation. "I'm not *leaving* him anywhere!" She rose to toss the bloodstained wad of tissue into the waste disposal with unnecessary force. She whirled with one hand on her hip to glare down at him, blue eyes glittering at his implied slur on her maternal nature. "I'm going to give him the choice. At 16 he is quite old enough to make up his mind - or don't you think so?"

The captain quailed visibly and tugged at the neck of his uniform. "Well, I - I didn't stop to think. I suppose 16 is old enough, if you say so."

Her offended air vanished and she subsided into her seat, divining the reason for his discomfiture. Almost with a groan, she said, "I'm not asking you to be a father to him, Jean-Luc."

Picard winced.

She shook her head, annoyed with herself at her clumsy choice of words. "Only to keep an eye on him," she appealed to him. "He has a great deal of respect for you, you know. He listens to you."

"Does he?" Picard looked unconvinced, still faintly alarmed. "Wouldn't he miss you terribly? I wouldn't know what to do."

"He might, a little, at first." She felt something tug at her heart, knowing she would miss him far more. She swallowed. "But he really doesn't need me any more. This ship is his home now, and he has the nearest thing he has ever known to a family here. He would never forgive me if I dragged him away from all of that now - and neither would I. The Enterprise can give him more than I ever can."

"Aren't you being a little hard on yourself?"

She shook her head ruefully. "No. Just honest. He belongs on a starship. Like his father did." She stared unseeingly at the deck.

Picard leaned towards her urgently, reaching towards her good hand cradling the injured one in her lap, did not - quite - touch them. With great gentleness, he asked, "Aren't you afraid of losing him too?"

Her eyes screwed shut. "Of course I'm afraid of losing him too!" she lashed out angrily. "But what do you expect me to do?"

He sat back before the force of her outburst. He shook his head, bemused. "I don't understand you, Beverly."

"I know you don't," she said sadly. *That just about sums up our relationship.* Despairingly, she cried, "Damn it, I can't stop him from living his life because I'm scared of what might happen to him!"

"But if it will distress you to leave him - ?"

"I didn't say that," she defended herself.

Picard tried again. "He is only a child, he is bound to do as you command."

"Did you feel such a child at 16?" she demanded, eyes flashing.

He frowned. "I can't remember."

"Don't you see? He is my son, not a crewmember I order around! He has the right to make up his own mind."

Picard opened his hands contritely. "I'm sorry. This is a subject on which I am obviously not qualified to comment. I'm not very - "

" - good with children!" she finished for him. *Or women, or emotions*, she added wryly in her mind. Her anger evaporated suddenly, leaving her exhausted. None of this was his fault. "Your skill at command entitles you to not being good with a hell of a lot more things than children, Jean-Luc."

"Thank you." He looked faintly surprised. "Naturally, if Wesley stays I'll do what I can for him. So will the others, I'm sure." A shadow came into his eyes, which made her stir uneasily, guessing his thoughts were of how eagerly Tasha would have taken to the role of mothering him.

"I'm very grateful," she said.

He pulled himself back to the present with a visible effort. "Not at all," he responded courteously. He rose to leave and she could think of no way to prolong the meeting; was so tired she didn't know if she even wanted to. She walked with him to the door where he paused awkwardly.

"Make sure you attend to that hand," he cautioned her.

She waved it carelessly. "Oh - I will." She forced a bright smile. *Nearly over.*

Picard took another step towards the door, then hesitated and turned irresolutely back to Beverly. Suddenly he reached to touch her shoulders and brushed her cheek lightly with his lips. He was gone so swiftly she was almost afraid she'd dreamed it, but his whispered, "I'm sorry," lingered in her memory. She put a disbelieving hand to her cheek, staring wonderingly at the closed door. Sorry? Because she was leaving? Because he'd made her angry? Or - an apology for all he could never be to her?

No matter! Whatever the future might hold in store for her nothing could ever change what had just happened. This was a special moment that was hers to cherish for all time, a memory to relive whenever she chose; it was a warm glow in her heart that felt as if it was there to stay.

She turned to attend to clearing up the pieces of broken glass, completely unaware of the tears running down her face, and was thankful that her love for him had proved strong enough to withhold from him her true reasons for leaving.



LIKE A LADY

Winner, 3rd prize, poetry competition, UFP Convention 1988

What's that you say, young fella?
The android with orange eyes?
You ask me what it was like to be
On board the first Enterprise?

Well, take me along this corridor
An' I'll tell you something, son;
We had a great adventure,
We had a lot of fun.

We were the first to go out there
Where none had gone before;
Our lady took us there and back:
We could not ask her more.

But so many young men died for her
So that she should live;
They made the ultimate sacrifice,
Giving all they had to give.

Even Spock...
He saved the ship, he saved us all,
But oh, the pain
As we watched him fall.

Then the battle over Genesis
Crippled and dying in the sky she hung
And with heavy Klingon footfalls
Loudly her proud hull rung.

We stood there sad on Genesis
And watched her flaming end
She took the Klingons with her
As we said farewell to our friend.

Kirk and Spock? Well, I'll tell you -
From what I've got in my head
Don't you worry none about them -
I know that they're not dead.

I know they're out there somewhere,
Far, far beyond Antares;
I know we'll meet again some day
As we race among the stars.

Now, you tell your Captain Picard
That I said this to you, my boy,
That your Enterprise is a lady,
Not just an expensive toy.

She'll be your friend and lover
And no matter where you roam,
You treat her like a lady
And she'll always bring you home.

Linda Wood

Things I'm tired of
Seeing in the new show...

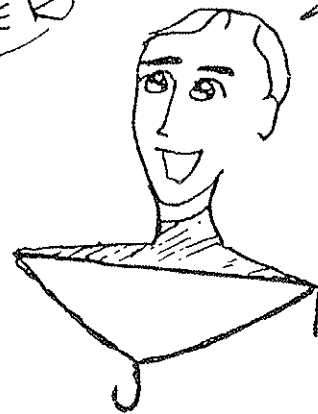
LT. Worf not getting any
decent lines, or getting to
even open his mouth for
that matter...



Wesley "Da Brat" Crusher
getting all of the line
That 80% of the other
players should have
gotten...

Then, on The 1,005th Time I
Saved The Enterprise... blah,
blah, blah... fired photon
Torpedoes at The saucer
section... Blah bbb... no
school no more!

EEK



Bullits won't
stop him!

Being reminded each and
every week that Data
is an artificial person

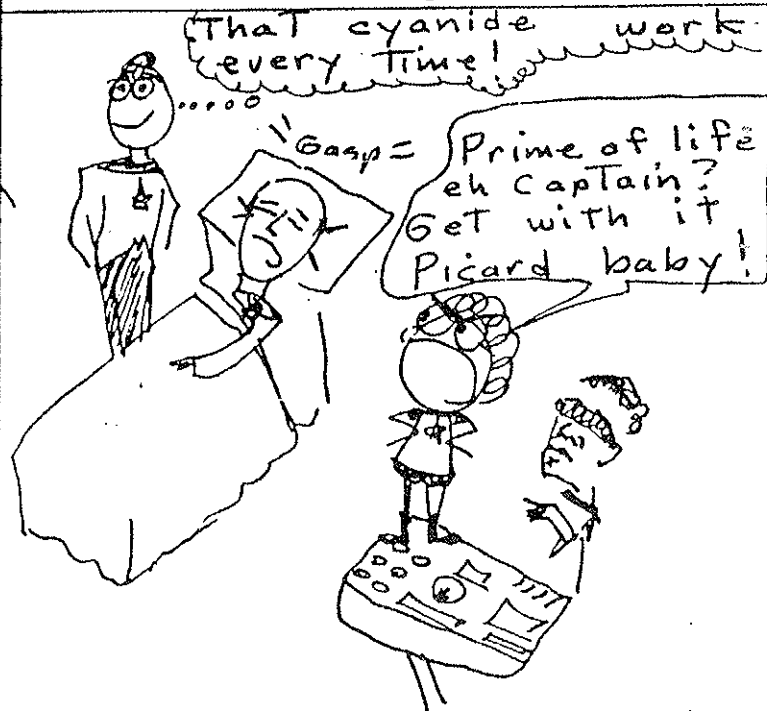
Data on an away Team

Perhaps I could get
a snow-tire head job
like LT. Worf!

Then 2
viewers
would
remember
I'm not
human!



And lastly, The way ST:TNG
Shows Picard operating
on The Bridge...



Frame - Gary '84

CHASING CLOUDS

by

Lorraine Goodison

(following events in Lonely Among Us)

The door chime had sounded twice before Picard roused himself enough to answer it. He glanced up as Riker entered, irritation in his expression and displeasure in his voice as he barked, "Yes, what is it, Number One? I'm rather busy at the moment and - "

"It's about what happened earlier, Captain."

Picard was beginning to recognise that not-quite-deferential tone of Riker's. It usually meant the First Officer had something on his mind, something which he anticipated would bring a confrontation with his Captain.

Picard paused in his task to look at Riker, noting the younger man's rigid stance. "Our guests? I'm sure you've dealt with it adequately, Riker, but I don't require a report at this time."

Riker drew himself up. His eyes shifted from the starfield behind Picard's head to the Captain himself. "That situation is under control, sir, but that was not what I came to talk about. I want to talk about the cloud entity."

"Ah." Picard put down his lightpen and laced his fingers together on the desk. "Surely that was dealt with at the debriefing. You had ample opportunity to put forward questions regarding its nature then."

"I know sir, but - " Riker's lips drew into a pensive line as he met Picard's direct gaze. "Permission to speak candidly, sir."

"Always."

The First Officer's posture eased a fraction but he still looked uneasy. "Captain, I have to make a report on the incident. The briefing answered all my questions - then. Afterwards, one other kept returning to my mind."

"And?" prompted Picard. "Get to the point, Riker, I've no time for this verbal fencing."

"And I'm not sure how much of what you did was the entity, and how much was you."

There was a long pause as Riker awaited Picard's reaction to a doubt both men found unpalatable.

Picard broke the silence with a wry, "I suppose I should have seen that coming..." His stern expression softened a little. "Why didn't you ask this at the debriefing? Counselor Troi could have answered it, I'm sure."

"It wasn't a point I fully considered until afterwards and... with all due respect, I don't think Counselor Troi's answer would

have helped me. You were the one under the entity's control"

The unspoken accusation was a wall between them, but only for a moment.

"And you want to know how fully under its control I was?" asked Picard.

Riker nodded. As the tension eased, he took the opportunity to sit opposite Picard, feeling strangely awkward interrogating his senior officer like this. Still, he had to know.

"When it took over Worf and Crusher, it used them simply as tools, to find a way to communicate." Riker paused, leaning forward in his seat, trying to put words to his disquiet. "When it took over you, it spoke through you, shared your knowledge and dreams."

"It was in me a good deal longer," Picard observed quietly, meeting Riker's scrutiny. "It needed a container."

"What it got was someone who empathised with it completely. On the Bridge, I asked you if it controlled you. Can you answer that now?"

Picard's silence told Riker far more than a simple yes or no. The Captain's expression was unreadable, as if shutters had closed on something no person would ever find the truth of. Undeterred, Riker pursued his point. "You resigned your commission, Captain! Was that the entity? If it was simply using your mind, why even consider your duties? Why not just wait and leave when it wished?"

"It did."

"And took you with it!"

"I came back, didn't I?" snapped Picard, abruptly rising, anger flooding his features. Just as quickly it dispersed, replaced by the troubled uncertainty which plagued his thoughts. "Are you asking me if I went willingly?" he continued softly. "Did I commit... physical suicide for the sake of some intangible dream?" He turned, leaning one hand against the bulkhead as his eyes searched the streaming starfield. "I don't know, Riker. I truly do not know."

"You can't remember?"

The Captain shook his head. "Flashes, mostly. After hearing the reports, I'm no longer sure which are true memories and which conjured up by my imagination."

"It said it offered you a way to realise your dreams. Did you accept?"

"Wouldn't you?" Picard asked mildly, letting his mind rest on the concept, even if he no longer remembered the actualisation.

"I don't know," Riker answered honestly. He shook his head slightly. "That's the thing that I keep coming back to. Twice it spoke of you and itself in the third person. It told Dr. Crusher that the... combination elated you, that you'd soon be... home."

"Yes... "

The acknowledgement was spoken so quietly, Riker almost missed it. He looked sharply at Picard, but the Captain's back was still turned to him and his stance conveyed very little.

Riker stood, walked across to the window. "Captain, I - "

"What made you join Starfleet, Will?" Picard gently interrupted.

Riker covered his surprise by staring out the window, but Picard did not notice the silence. The Commander leaned against the bulkhead, reflecting Picard's introspective mood. "I guess to travel, to see what was out beyond the limitations of a planetary atmosphere," Riker answered, his lips curving into a rueful smile over a distant memory. "Or maybe it was the shiny majestic starships. I really can't remember, it's been a part of me for so long."

Jean-Luc Picard nodded, remembering his own needs. "I wanted to see the stars up close," he said, his voice deep and sombre like rich brandy. "I wanted to reach out and touch them, to be part of them, to understand their secrets and be as one with them." He smiled as he glanced across at Riker. "I wonder if that yearning is a pre-requisite for Starfleet enrolment?"

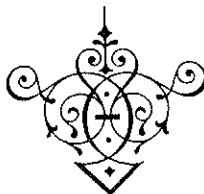
"I should think it's the most important quality," responded Riker.

"Yes, and it was that fundamental desire that the entity picked up on." Picard turned his back on the view, facing Riker candidly. "I can't answer your questions. The incident is too tangled up with my basic temperament. I can't say - this ideal was mine, that dream was the entity's - but I can tell you I don't care to examine the question too closely."

Riker nodded, aware that he was unlikely ever to get a proper answer. Perhaps there was none. Only the Captain knew what had occurred in that incredible empathy, and the entity had taken that knowledge with it. His report would have to be concerned with the known facts, and more esoteric considerations laid aside.

Watching the stars, Riker murmured, "Wouldn't it be something to travel in the blink of an eye; with a thought, transverse galaxies?"

Picard regarded him thoughtfully. "Yes, Number One. It would be... something."



DEPARTED FRIEND

We gather on the holodeck, sorrow in our hearts,
Amid green grass, blue sky and distant singing birds.
We come to honour Tasha as this life her soul departs,
The way she asked, to listen to her words.

Her image stands before us in her dear, familiar way,
She says we're all the family she had.
To each of us she's something comforting to say,
Trying to make her death not seem so bad.

Deanna's sobbing softly - she was her closest friend,
This must be for her a special kind of hell.
On top of her own pain at Tasha's brave, untimely end
She has to suffer all our grief, as well.

Will stands strong and caring, her waist his arm supports,
With memories of the slime their eyes are filled.
Both know what Tasha went through; Troi sensed its evil thoughts
And felt Yar die, and Will was almost killed.

Yar tells him he's the best and thanks him for his trust
And encouragement and times he made her laugh.
Troi, she says, gives so much love, and helped her to adjust
And taught by quiet example on her behalf.

Warriors, orphans, both; she and Worf were of a kind,
Klingon creed deems crucial how one dies.
She earned respect and honour from this friend she leaves behind,
She met death well - wide open were her eyes.

She speaks of Bev's devotion which comes from deep within,
From her for excellence she learned to strive.
The doctor blames herself for the fight she could not win,
(If she'd striven more, would Yar still be alive?)

Yar tells young Wes she's sorry she'll never see him growing
Into the fine man she's sure that he will be.
Geordi's thanked for friendship, and somehow always knowing
When she despaired; for helping her to see.

Tasha turns to Data, who seems afraid, unsure,
But as she speaks his face lights up with pleasure.
"You see with childlike wonder, that makes you even more
"Human than us." This tribute he will treasure.

A lump comes to my throat as she turns in my direction,
More tender are her eyes, her smile, her voice,
Than she'd let me see in life (was she afraid of my rejection?)
She states her life - and death - were her own choice.

She never knew her parents; survived unloved, alone,
Until Starfleet hope and dignity allowed.
She wanted to be like me - that I hadn't known,
And she says she hopes her captain might be proud.

Guilt tears at my soul at these words I didn't expect
For the things I should have said before she died.
Too late now to tell her she always had my deep respect
And my love, esteem - and especially my pride.

We stand a while in silence, good memories now we're sharing
Of our dear, departed friend, Natasha Yar.
Recall her love, her laugh, her grace, her caring,
Her brave free spirit. I whisper, "Au revoir."

"This gathering is concluded." Her friends start to withdraw,
Seeking, finding comfort in each other -
Companionship brings solace, makes their hearts less sore.
One stays behind, whom she loved like a brother.

Data turns to face me, tears glistening in each eye,
I'm shocked, and ask him gently how he's feeling.
"This is Tasha's gift - I never knew that I could cry,
"Now I can learn the Human way of healing."

He smiles at me through tears that shouldn't exist
And leaves, and now all sounds abruptly cease.
Android tears for a friend who will be missed,
While her captain prays that she may rest in peace.

by Karen Sparks



A TWIST IN TIME

by

Jacqueline Y. Comben

"Captain's Log, Stardate 42502.6:

Enterprise is en route to the planet Laneron to attempt renegotiation of the contract for supply of dilithium crystals. Laneron is not a member of the Federation and the Lanerions have no desire to travel the galaxy. However, the planet has always been willing to accept bauxite, of which many of our planets have excess, in exchange for the crystals essential to our warp drive power. Now, it seems, the planet is no longer happy with the terms of our agreement, as dilithium was refused to the cargo vessel recently sent to make the regular exchange. The Chairman of the Ruling Council, one Kannon, specifically asked that the Captain of U.S.S. Enterprise be sent to discuss the matter..."

Jean-Luc Picard paused. He was at a loss as to why the Lanerions should wish to negotiate with him. He had never visited their planet and did not think he was particularly well known as a diplomat, although all starship Captains were obliged to act as part-time Federation Ambassadors, since often they were the most senior representative on the spot.

At that moment, Lieutenant Worf reported,

"Message coming in from Starfleet Command, Captain."

Picard turned off his log recorder and ordered,

"On screen, please."

A few moments later he was heartily wishing that a new Galaxy class vessel would be launched soon, as immediately thereafter his ship would cease to be bedevilled by assorted persons who either wanted to gawk at or in some way exploit the newest-and-best in the Fleet! So far Enterprise had been 'inspected' by an ancient Admiral from the Medical Branch, had been annoyed by Q, had her perfectly good engines 'tuned' by a fool who had been made use of by the Traveller, had attracted two Conspiracy-connected visits, had her computers 'adjusted' by the Bynars... and now she was to divert from her mission in order to collect an Admiral whose purpose was to 'check' the computer. There was nothing wrong with the computer! The Bynars had put right their 'adjustments' before leaving and Data was quite happy with the result. This Admiral was just like that aged doctor, coming to satisfy his curiosity with no good reason. He, Picard, and his crew would be disrupted and their arrival at Laneron delayed, purely because Enterprise happened to be the vessel everyone in Starfleet wanted to visit, and full Admirals got their own way. He did not log that opinion, but he was sorely tempted to do so.

Enterprise, fortunately, did not have to divert far off course in order to rendezvous with U.S.S. Faragut. Told that the Admiral

was ready to beam over, Picard left Riker in charge of the Bridge, since protocol demanded that he 'welcome' his honoured guest. He ordered Geordi La Forge to the Transporter Room, as his Chief Engineer was obliged to take charge when the beam-over was of such a high ranking officer, and took with him Data and Counselor Troi. His Science Officer would be the person who dealt with the Admiral's official purpose for coming and Troi was the only member of his crew who might be able to tell him something about the Admiral's reactions.

As the glitter of the beam solidified, Picard, polite rather than honest, opened his mouth to say, "Welcome..."; Deanna shivered, and the new arrival spoke, asking,

"Permission to come aboard, Captain?"

This archaic and meaningless politeness was the last thing Picard had expected and it took him a moment to reply, looking up at the expressionless Vulcan face,

"Granted, Admiral Spock. Of course."

The Admiral appeared somewhat older than was usual for a Vulcan of his age. His face was heavily and deeply lined and his hair thickly streaked with silver. However, his tall, thin body, at parade rest, seemed to radiate erect dignity and, when he stepped from the platform, he did so with a stride which implied physical fitness many a man of thirty would have envied.

"May I present Ship's Counselor Deanna Troi and my Science Officer, Lieutenant Commander Data." Picard said.

"Counselor." This word was said flatly and was simply an acknowledgement of her presence. The Admiral then looked at Data and raised one eyebrow, clearly questioning.

The object of the look, by now used to such queries, hastened to explain that he had graduated from Starfleet Academy, Class of...

"I have every confidence in Mr. Data." Picard said, interrupting his Science Officer's flow of words.

"Evidently," was the Admiral's comment.

"Your quarters..." began the Captain.

"My stated purpose for being here is to evaluate your library computer and sensor programs in operation. To do so, I need first to go to the Bridge," said Spock.

"Mr. Data will show you..." Picard began, and again was cut off in mid-sentence.

"Unnecessary."

"Admiral Spock designed our computer, Captain." Data put in, helpfully.

Somehow, all four of them were in the corridor heading for the turbo-lift, with Admiral Spock in the lead, without Picard being quite sure how this had happened. When they entered the lift, it was Spock who said, "Bridge", and it was he who led the way out, going directly to the main Science Station. Data, hoping to learn

something from the senior computer specialist in Starfleet, followed him with rather the air of an eager puppy. He was rewarded with one look of flat dismissal and was then ignored, as Spock began to operate various sections of the console. The Vulcan had positioned himself so that the android could not really see what he was doing and he was running the computer in 'silent' mode.

The Captain, observing this, had to stop himself from grinding his teeth. He knew Vulcans were never polite, but such treatment of his Science Officer was, in his opinion, uncalled-for rudeness. He glanced at Troi and realised she had not said a word since the Admiral arrived, and now looked close to tears. Confused, he nodded towards his Ready Room, where they could talk privately.

Once there, Picard asked,

"Is something wrong, Deanna? Do you sense something from the Admiral?"

"Captain," she replied in a strained whisper, "all Vulcans shield their minds. They... In a way they are the opposite of my people. As a half-Betazoid, I find it hard to sense actual thoughts. I usually detect only emotions. In fact I normally have to shut my mind because the flood of so many people's feelings is... confusing."

"Yes." Jean-Luc nodded.

"Vulcans are telepaths who, if they have feelings, do not let them surface, and who deliberately do not communicate. Certain of them... healers... use touch to sense thoughts, with the permission of the subject, but always a Vulcan is... like a blank to me. I sense only... a shield. I cannot describe the sensation clearly. But..." She paused and shivered before adding, "Admiral Spock is different."

"Oh?" Picard queried.

"It is... It is as if he were shielded in ice, Captain!" Deanna cried, clearly very upset. Then, seeing and sensing confused query, she added, "If you were to approach a very, very cold storage area, before you reached it you would feel the chill. It is like that. I do not sense the Admiral's shield. I do not feel nothing. I feel... a chill which stops me approaching close enough to reach the shield. I am not explaining..."

"I think you're explaining very well," Jean-Luc assured her. "Do you...?" He paused, for he had been about to ask if she thought the Vulcan was hiding something, but that was ridiculous. This Admiral had never been involved in the alien conspiracy and was obviously here purely to see how his latest computer was performing in actual use. He might lack a real excuse for the visit, he might privately distrust the Bynars and wish to check that they had changed nothing for the worse, but he would hardly go to such trouble to hide those motives. Another thought struck him,

"His reaction to Data?" he asked.

"If anything, Captain, the chill became more intense when you introduced Data. I sensed..." She frowned. "Sir, at the time I was aware only of the chill, but I did sense... disapproval."

"He doesn't approve of Data?"

"I do not understand him, Captain, and I could be wrong, but I think..." She was clearly 'looking inward'. "Yes," she said, more confidently. "Disapproval."

"I shall be very glad when he has finished his checks," was Picard's comment and it was obvious that Counselor Troi heartily agreed.

To the relief of the Bridge Crew, after ten minutes, Spock departed to Auxiliary Control to continue his tests. When Data offered to accompany him, the Admiral said flatly,

"Unnecessary," and his order to the turbo-lift came so quickly thereafter that the door shut in the Science Officer's face.

"Captain!" gasped Riker. "That was damned rude!"

"He is an Admiral," Deanna said softly, not wanting Riker to get himself into trouble by speaking his mind next time he saw that icy individual.

"Data, take over Ops." Picard ordered, making the best of the situation. "Could you see what tests the Admiral was doing?"

"No, sir," Data reported as he sat down. "Admiral Spock was positioned so that observation was difficult. All I know is that he was operating sensor banks using unusual settings." He paused, running checks himself. "Now, Sir, the Admiral has set up coded blocks, such that I cannot access his work." There was a hint of wonder in the Science Officer's voice. "I am not sure how he has done that."

"Captain, you don't think one of those aliens might still be alive and have taken over Admiral Spock, do you?" Riker asked.

"No," said Troi with certainty. "I sensed nothing like that from the aliens."

"Nothing like what?"

"Cold." The Counselor shivered. "Logic, I suppose. Very cold logic."

Silently, Jean-Luc Picard thought, *Logic? Which disapproved of Data? I see nothing logical in that.*

Enterprise reached Laneron only three hours late. Announcing himself, Picard was greeted by Chairman Kannon with the words,

"Your ship is the Enterprise?"

"Yes..."

"Then you may come to our Council Chamber. The Captain of that other vessel tried to discuss terms, but we refuse to negotiate with lesser officers. We understood that your Federation valued our dilithium sufficiently to send to us its chief ship. We have always before been accorded the courtesy of dealing with the Captain of the best vessel. We were surprised at the attempt to deny us the level

of negotiator to which we are accustomed. We are pleased that this... oversight... has been rectified."

It had not occurred to Picard that the Ruling Council of Laneron suffered from the 'newest-and-best' syndrome, but it was obvious that the demand to see him was prompted purely by that malady. When he beamed down, the actual changes Kannon asked for in the terms of the contract for dilithium supply were minimal. Somehow, word had reached this planet that the Federation had launched a new, better class of ship, and these people had at once seen a visit as their due.

In conversation, it transpired that Laneron had asked for and received a meeting with the Captain of each preceding new class of starship. The fact that the vessel, of necessity, remained in orbit and could not be seen from the planet did not seem to matter to them in the least. In effect, the main item in the terms of their trading agreement, in their minds, was that, as soon as Starfleet improved its leading class, such a ship must go to Laneron as a demonstration of the value set upon the planet by the Federation. They did not expect, or want, a long visit. All they wanted was for the newest and best to come. They saw this as a status symbol.

Jean-Luc, who wanted to explore the unknown, not to be waved as a flag by anyone, was more than a little annoyed, but he was obliged to smile and be polite and sign the new contract in front of holo-recorders which allowed all details of the ceremony to be transmitted to everyone on Laneron.

"See how important we are!" was the underlying message of the broadcast. "Once again the Federation Starfleet has sent its very best to negotiate with us. We are still as important to them as we were when the first contract was agreed."

It was childish, but dilithium was essential, so its possessors could be as infantile as they liked with impunity and the Captains of successive starships had to smile, while feeling like trophies being added to the planetary collection! When Picard, finally, was able to touch his communicator to announce that he was ready to beam up, he was certain that all those before him, save perhaps the first, had felt just as relieved as he did to be leaving Laneron.

Commander Riker was as pleased to hear of his Captain's imminent return as Picard was to be coming.

Admiral Spock had returned to the Bridge.

Data had been working at the science console and had been told, flatly,

"I will take over here."

Neither Riker nor Data could very well argue with a full Admiral, and the First Officer had only to look at that forbidding cold dignity to lose any thought of protest he might have nursed. He had told Data to take over Ops again and hoped the Vulcan would not stay long. The atmosphere on the Bridge was as chilly as Deanna had reported the Admiral's mind to be.

Wesley, who had arrived to take his watch at Con, noticed the lack of camaraderie and finally located the braided uniform as the

reason. By standing staring around before taking his station, he gained himself a long, measuring look from the wearer of the braid and he sat down very hurriedly, feeling more like six than sixteen and sure that he would be ordered away, fast!

However, just as the Captain's signal was received, the Admiral departed as abruptly as he had arrived. Riker wondered whether to send Data back to the science station and decided to wait. Once Picard was aboard, they would be moving off to their next assignment. The Captain could sort out what to do about the disruption of his Science Officer's research work.

The Transporter Chief of U.S.S. Enterprise locked on to the Captain's signal and operated the controls. A moment later she was staring open-mouthed at a perfect stranger in a weird outfit that just might be some alien's idea of a Starfleet uniform, based, maybe, on blurred pictures obtained illicitly. That thought jerked her out of shock and she grabbed the phaser kept at the console for occasions like this, and levelled it at the intruder. Then she hit the intercom switch,

"Transporter Room to Bridge. Intruder Alert!"

"Security detail to Transporter Room," she heard ordered, before the First Officer added, "Rand, please specify."

"Sir, I locked on to the Captain's communicator, I'm sure I did, and the beam-up went quite normally, but the Captain hasn't arrived. Someone else is here instead."

"I will come down, Chief. Keep the intruder there under guard. Bridge out."

"Who are you?" Rand asked the stranger, angrily. "Where is our Captain?"

"I am Jean-Luc Picard, and I assure you..." began the man as Pavel Chekov and three of his section entered at a run, phasers drawn, and aimed them at the speaker.

Picard sighed. What had happened he could not guess, but he recognised the ancient uniform worn... he was not sure how long ago... and he had seen Transporter Rooms like this in the Starfleet museum. He opened his mouth to assure these people that his intentions were peaceful, just as the door opened again to admit a tall thin figure. The hair was free of grey and the face less deeply lined, but he recognised this Vulcan. The last time he had seen him had been on his own Bridge!

The Vulcan entered the Transporter Room just as Geordi was operating the controls, and caused him to look over at the door, surprised. He couldn't imagine why this computer expert had suddenly decided to come here, and opened his mouth to ask.

"Welcome aboard, Captain," said the Admiral in a voice which sounded... amused.

Geordi looked towards the platform and gaped, for the man standing there was a total stranger and was dressed in fancy dress,

for that uniform had been worn before Geordi's father was born!

The stocky man frowned. He looked from the Vulcan to LaForge and his frown became closer to a glare. Then he looked down at himself, patted his clothes as if pleased to see he was still dressed, and said,

"My uniform is O.K. so... Not an alternate universe?"

"No, Captain," said the Vulcan Admiral. "A temporal shift. A warp in time."

"I'm in the future?" Even as he said it, James T. Kirk took in the amount of white in Spock's hair and realised that it fitted.

"Affirmative," came the answer.

"Spock, risk of changing... your past?"

"None, Jim. I will explain as we go. I have more sensor readings to check before I can send you back. Come."

They had gone before Geordi had taken in what was happening. His first cogent thought was that the pair had been talking some sort of shorthand. Then he realised he had understood, and hurriedly called the Bridge.

"Commander Riker, I locked on to the Captain, but he never arrived. Instead someone else..."

"Worf, get down there," Riker ordered. "Carry on, Geordi."

"I think from the past, Sir. From before I was born." He remembered that crazy uniform and added, "I'd say more like a hundred years! They already..."

"They?"

"Er.. the Vulcan Admiral and..."

"Do you mean Admiral Spock's there?"

"Was, Sir. He came in when I was beaming up the Captain."

"I thought you said the Captain didn't beam up!" Riker groaned. "Explain again, Geordi. Exactly what happened? In detail."

Spock raised an eyebrow as he regarded Picard.

"You are?"

"Jean-Luc Picard..." This was difficult. Could he change the future if he said too much? Then it dawned on him that this Vulcan was... or would be... on his ship and that some sort of connection seemed inevitable. "I am," he said, "Captain of U.S.S. Enterprise."

"And I am the Tsar of all the Russias!" exclaimed Pavel Chekov. "Mr. Spock, let me put this... person... in the Brig!"

"Not yet," Spock said. "Contract Number of your vessel?" This

last was addressed to Jean-Luc, who began to admire the man... or rather Vulcan.

"NCC-1701D." replied the Captain, while realising that he had not thought of the Admiral on his ship as anything but a Vulcan.

In unison, as a result of his answer, Spock said,

"Fascinating," while Chekov gasped,

"What?"

The First Officer turned to Rand,

"Were there any irregularities in the signal? Any fluctuations? Anything anomalous? Any tendency to bounce and return?"

"No Sir," she assured him. "It was absolutely normal." She was feeling that she must have done something wrong, but could not imagine what.

"Mr. Scott to Transporter Room," Spock ordered over the intercom. To Chekov he said, "Clearly all circuits must be checked. I must replay sensor readings to determine whether any data may be obtained from those. Meanwhile, keep our visitor here. I am unwilling to change any parameters until I have more data. Ah, Mr. Scott..." as that worthy arrived, "check all transporter circuits for any malfunction, however minor."

The engineer eyed Picard,

"Who may he be?"

"The victim, it seems, of a phenomenon which has also robbed us of Captain Kirk..."

"Spock, I heard..." Another arrival began speaking before he was even inside the room. He stopped there and glared at Jean-Luc, "Who's he? Where's Jim?"

"I think Mr. Spock is saying you is the result of a transporter malfunction," said Scott, not without sarcasm.

"You mean he came up instead of Jim? Dammit, then it's obvious..." advancing towards Picard, "...you stole Jim's communicator and..."

"Doctor, do not allow your emotions to betray you," Spock chided. "We have no evidence for such a theft."

"Don't we? How come he's here and Jim isn't?"

"I can postulate a number of reasons, of which theft is but one and that..."

"The most likely!"

"In your opinion, Doctor." Spock touched the intercom. "Uhura, please contact Laneron and ask to speak to Chairman Venko. If he replies, tell him we have suffered a minor malfunction and..."

"Spock!" gasped McCoy.

"...that we will be remaining in orbit while repairs are put into effect." Spock continued calmly. "I am on my way to the Bridge. When I arrive, I shall require an exact account of your conversation with the surface. Spock out."

"Spock, you should be demanding that they release Jim..."

"Doctor. I have no evidence that they have the Captain on Laneron. Remain here, by all means, but..."

"Oh no! I'm coming along to talk some sense into you!"

As they went, Picard found himself smiling, sure that the doctor was doing exactly as Spock wanted. It seemed the Vulcan did not need an Admiral's uniform to make his wishes into orders. The doctor, who he could just manage to reconcile with the ancient of his own time, had a very strong personality, yet he doubted if the man often won an argument with Spock.

"You! Stand still!" ordered Pavel Chekov, bringing Picard's mind back to the difficulties of his situation. The Captain sighed and complied.

"How many years?" Kirk asked, and then stared in amazement as a young child ran past the end of the corridor.

"Seventy eight years, two hundred and six days, exactly. You will need to remember that, Jim."

"Spock!" Pointing, as another child followed the first.

"Oh, yes."

"What ship is this?"

"U.S.S. Enterprise - "with classic leprechaun look.

"Spock, that was... what are children doing aboard and roaming the corridors unsupervised?"

"This ship carries more civilians than crew. Jim, come into this Briefing Room. We have time."

As they entered, further along the corridor, the turbo-lift opened to disgorge Worf, of whom Kirk caught a glimpse as the door of the Briefing Room closed.

"Spock, was that a Klingon?"

"Affirmative," and, answering the implied question, "Treaty."

"Oh, I see."

"You did not mention that on your return, Jim. Will not, I mean."

"O.K., I'll keep it to myself. Spock... children on a starship?"

"This vessel was designed for a ten year mission, Captain. The thinking at Starfleet Command was to the effect that it was not

reasonable to part families for so long. Given that proviso... many other civilians were also accommodated... scientists... writers..."

"We've been in space longer than ten years. I know there was a break, but not by our choice. Dedicated professionals don't have families. How can...?"

"Jim, I hasten to assure you that the idea was not mine and that I am not stationed aboard. I am here purely to assure your return."

Kirk eyed his friend,

"You are still in the Fleet? Yes, I can see how that get-up was derived from our uniform. I don't like it. It's a brightened up version of those ghastly grey outfits they tried at one time. But how do you tell rank? No sleeve braid, no tabs... What rank are you?"

"An admiral, but..."

"I should be calling you 'Sir'," grinning.

"No, Jim. I assure you I never outrank you."

"Did you say...?" as it suddenly came home to him, "Seventy eight...? Of course, Vulcans... your father was over a hundred when we first met him. You..." he winced, "I'm dead and gone, aren't I?"

"Jim, my apologies, but I cannot tell you of your own future. You understand way not. I can, in fact, tell you only that which I know I did tell you." Then, ruefully, "My apologies, I mean..."

"I know what you mean." Grinning, "Nearly eighty years ago, I... did I just vanish?"

"The Captain of this Enterprise exchanged with you. Since he had no way to establish his bona fides, he was kept in the Transporter Room under guard. I tended to believe his claim, which was another reason for keeping him as sequestered as possible. Your return was certainly achieved from this end, however."

"And I came back and told you I'd met your future self, who had told me certain things... Oh, I see!"

"Yes, Jim. This enabled me to know when I must visit this Enterprise in order to welcome you aboard. I set sensors to try to detect the temporal field shift. I took all steps I could devise to obtain the necessary data to bring about your safe return, but I have not yet solved the problem. Logically, since you did return, I will, however, find a solution. Now let us go to the Bridge."

"Sir," Uhura reported, "Chairman Venko said that he was sorry to hear about the malfunction." She smiled and a mischievous look appeared in her eyes as she continued, "Actually, I think he was very pleased to hear about it. He liked the fact that, although we're way ahead of his planet, things do go wrong with our equipment. He looked smug to me. He wished us well, though, and offered any help Laneron can supply."

"The Captain was definitely in the Council Chamber with Venko

when he called to be beamed up, was he not?"

"Yes, Sir," she nodded.

"Venko did not seem... guilty?"

"No, Sir." Uhura's smile widened. When he asked questions like that, he was admitting to understanding a lot about emotions he wouldn't admit to directly, even now.

"You bet he's guilty!" McCoy interjected. "Oh, I'm not surprised he's feeling smug! He's put one over on us!"

"Doctor?" Uhura asked.

Spock had moved to the sensor controls and now started to run through all the data collected in the past hour.

"What's going on?" asked Sulu from helm.

"The Captain has been transposed with another person. I am trying to determine the cause so that we can reverse the effect," Spock said.

"The cause, Spock, is obvious to a blind man!" Bones McCoy told him. "That man made a grab for Jim's communicator just as Rand started to beam him up."

"That explanation does not fit all known facts, Doctor," Spock assured him, calm as ever. He straightened from his console and headed for the turbo-lift.

"Now where are you going?" Bones asked.

"Back to the Transporter Room."

"Then I'm coming too!"

Riker had just about assimilated Geordi's full story when the turbo-lift opened and Admiral Spock entered the Bridge alongside a shorter, stockily built man dressed in... The First Officer gulped. He recognised that face. He knew very well that some of Kirk's methods were frowned upon now. In fact he thought that his, and any other First Officer's, right to forbid a Captain to beam down to any planet not confirmed as safe, together with their general duty with respect to their Captains' safety, dated from analysis of Kirk's habit of going into danger himself, come what may. Nevertheless, that man had saved Earth a lot more than once and had been his own childhood hero. He'd read all he could about him. Now, here he was... in that uniform... looking no older than Captain Picard...

Kirk automatically gave a 'back to your work, Mister' nod, and such was his natural air of command, that Riker had snapped guiltily around to check the read-outs before it hit him that he had done so. Then he glanced over at Deanna, to find that she was staring into space with an expression of joy on her face. He didn't find anything in the least joyful about the situation. In fact, he kept thinking he would wake up in a minute!

If Riker was in shock, Kirk himself was not in much better

case! He followed Spock and hissed, for Vulcan ears only,

"Which is the Con? Or is this ship run by committee?"

"The Command Seat is the centre one down there," Spock whispered.

"Crazy! What idiot designed this Bridge?"

"I am not certain I should tell you that, although I could find out from the computer."

"It's O.K., I won't murder the fool in his or her cradle! Though I'd be tempted, so I guess you'd better not tell me."

While Spock checked his instruments and Riker tried to find words to question the presence of this unexpected visitor, Kirk looked around with narrowing eyes. He stared very hard at Wesley, so hard that Wes felt the look and glanced around. His jaw dropped. He gulped and returned his gaze to Con in a sort of self-defence reaction. Fighting disbelief, James T. Kirk then noticed Data. He opened his mouth to question Spock, but at that moment his friend rose and said,

"I have the necessary data. Let us return to the Transporter Room."

Kirk was only too pleased to oblige!

"Spock..." McCoy was saying as they arrived back at the Transporter Room, where Chekov had dismissed his people, but was still, himself, keeping ever-watchful guard on Picard, while Scott was in the act of replacing the access plates on the console, helped by Rand. "...Spock, when will you admit the obvious?"

"Obvious, Doctor? Mr. Chekov, tell Dr. McCoy who our visitor claimed to be."

"The Captain, Sir!" Pavel replied, glaring wolfishly at Picard.

"What?" the doctor gaped.

"Do you imagine he expected us to accept him as such?" Spock asked.

"Of course not! But..."

"In fact, he claims to be the Captain, not of this vessel, but of a future ship of the same name; the victim of a temporal disfunction."

"A what?"

"A... twist, one might say, in time."

"Is that so?" asked Scott, "Are you saying that get-up is Starfleet uniform?" This last was addressed to Picard, who nodded.

"That's insane!" McCoy declared. "You'd never get me into an outfit like that!"

"Doctor, if this man had arrived asking for asylum, that would make some sense with your theory. However, a person from Laneron would hardly misappropriate the Captain's communicator and then make a claim of such magnitude. There is also the matter of that communicator, which is not in our visitor's possession. His garb is not such that he could hide even so modest an item."

"So, how did he call us?"

"He did not, Doctor. Captain Kirk called us. Mr. Scott, have you detected any malfunction?"

"No, and whether you came from the future or that planet, it was not the transporter's fault. It's in perfectly good order."

"I still say Jim's on that planet!" McCoy insisted. "They may be torturing him for information while you chase around looking for twists in time! This crazy story is just aimed at keeping us guessing and you fell for it!"

"Indeed? Why, Doctor, should the Ruling Council of Laneron wish to extract information from the Captain?"

"I don't know! They don't have space flight, do they? They said they don't want it. Maybe they lied? Or there could be Klingons down there."

"Sensors inform otherwise, and before you suggest it, Doctor, neither are there any Romulans in evidence."

Spock was talking while making careful checks of the transporter settings. Suddenly he frowned as one of the controls began to flicker. He ordered,

"Rand, make sure the settings are exactly as before. Beam our visitor down at once and immediately reverse and beam back."

She hastened to obey, while Scott and McCoy, in chorus, asked,

"What good will that do?"

"The console began to give faint operational readings," Spock told them, "as if being activated from elsewhere. It may be that someone is attempting to return our Captain to us."

"Clutching at straws, Spock?" McCoy asked. "You?"

Worf was far from pleased. He had reached the Transporter Room just in time to find the intruder gone, had returned to the Bridge and, finding him not there, had gone to Auxiliary Control. Drawing another blank, he had started back towards the Transporter Room, only to meet Geordi, who seemed sure the Bridge was where the Admiral and historic relic had been headed. They entered a turbo-lift eventually, at Geordi's insistence, and were currently stationary, probably due to someone else having told another car to stop in mid-journey somewhere on their route.

Unaware that he was causing the Klingon Security Chief considerable frustration, Spock had ordered the turbo-lift to 'Hold' so that he could spend a little time answering some of Kirk's burning questions, which had begun with the comment,

"The kid on helm... he only looked about fifteen!"

"I had reason to check," Spock said. "He is sixteen Earth years of age and has been given the nominal rank of Acting Ensign. He came aboard as a passenger. His mother was assigned as Ship's Medical Officer."

"Spock, he was operating that console! I know we're only in standard orbit, but it's criminal to let a kid like that loose without a competent officer beside him. In fact, it's criminal to let a kid do anything on the Bridge, except watch! And I don't like kids on the Bridge at all..."

"I entirely agree with your sentiments on the matter, but this is not our ship."

"Thanks be!" Kirk said, with feeling, then, "There was something odd about the one on the other console... is that navigation or weaponry? He looked almost metallic."

"An android, Captain... and assigned as Science Officer."

"An android?"

"Jim, I assure you that I find the idea of a computer operating a computer as superfluous as, it is clear, you do. The android was apparently allowed to enter Starfleet Academy and, not surprisingly, passed out with honours. I am sure those constructed by the device discovered by Dr. Corby, and the Norman model we found in attendance upon Harry Mudd, could have passed just as easily. The fault lay in allowing an android to enter in the first place."

"Androids are treated like people now?"

"Negative, Captain. I checked. This is the only example. It was found on a colony planet after the colonists, including its constructor, had been killed by an entity summoned by another android. This one, fortunately, has less destructive programming. The other was like M5."

Kirk winced.

"This one... I have not studied it, but it seems to have been constructed with only a limited effort towards inclusion of human engrams. It is basically logical. However, some of the logs I consulted imply that it tries to be illogical."

Spock did not actually shudder, but Kirk knew him very well. He choked with laughter and gasped,

"Bones would love that!"

"Indeed? On this ship, Captain, the android is a Lieutenant Commander and gives orders to those of lower rank."

"Bones wouldn't love that!" - sobered

"Precisely. In this instance, I find myself in agreement with the good doctor."

"Me too, Spock, you know that." Kirk shivered, remembering M5 only too well.

Spock instructed the turbo-lift to resume travel, unknowingly allowing Worf and Geordi to start again towards the Bridge. Geordi had been taking apart a control panel, to try to find out what was wrong, and the jerk caused him to drop it on Worf's foot. He heard some interesting words as a result.

Kirk was saying.

"Can't you...? If you're an Admiral...?"

"I am not in the correct chain of command to change anything here. I will point out the illogic of supplying a starship with two computers instead of one, but someone in Command Branch sanctioned this arrangement, so I do not expect my representations to bear fruit. I shall be very pleased to leave this vessel."

"Not as pleased as I shall!" said Kirk as the turbo-lift doors opened to reveal two small girls running by, one carrying... a tribble!

They entered the empty Transporter Room.

"Spock...? Look... I know you aren't usually on this crazy ship. You're O.K.? Your life is... O.K.?"

"Affirmative," Spock replied in a very reassuring tone, adding, "Jim, please take your usual station on the platform. Time is now of the essence."

Kirk moved to oblige, telling himself that, although all Spock's old friends had... must have... died, he'd surely made others. He was wearing his 'what the hell?' grin as he positioned himself for beaming.

"Live Long and Prosper..." said Spock softly, as he operated the controls, "...my friend."

"I'll do my damndest!" Kirk assured him. He added "Good luck, Spock!" as the transporter beam took him.

"Welcome home, Captain."

It was almost like an echo, but this Spock's hair was all black and...

"Jim!" Bones McCoy was yelling, laughing.

"Are we glad to see you, Captain!" Scotty grinned.

"Not as glad as I am to see you!" Kirk assured them all as he stepped off the platform. "Pavel, you can put away the phaser."

"Oh. Of course, Captain. Are you all right, Sir?"

"I'm fine."

"Jim, where were you? Did those damned people down there kidnap you? I should have you in Sickbay for a check out..."

"Bones, I'm perfectly all right. I'm sorry I can't tell any of you anything, except that some kind of time warp took me into the

future. Bones, you, of all people, must realise I can't know what changes I might cause if I told you anything at all."

"But..."

"Bones, you have to accept that!"

"That... the one in the cat suit... he really was from the future?"

"Yes. He didn't tell you anything, did he?"

"Only that he was the Captain of the Enterprise, Sir," Chekov volunteered. "I thought he was a crazy man!"

"I'll tell you one thing. I don't envy him his job one bit! And Bones... believe me... you'd rather not know what it was like, or rather will be like!"

"That bad, Jim?"

"That bad! Now, Scotty, Rand, Chekov, back to stations. We have to get this ship out of orbit and on our way. Spock, with me!"

Jean-Luc Picard relaxed. He smiled,

"I'm not surprised to see you here, Sir. I gather I owe my return to you?"

"Affirmative. Or to... James T. Kirk. When he returned, he told me the time difference. I was thus able to ensure that I was aboard your ship and ready to rectify the situation when it occurred. You will understand why I could give you no warning and why the incident was never logged?"

"I think so." Picard frowned. "It had happened, so it had to happen in that way. If I'd waited to beam up, it might have changed the past."

Spock's eyebrow flicked,

"Due to the diversion to collect me, you did delay. To the, so to speak, right time. But in essence, your thinking is correct. Now I will go to the quarters assigned to me. I will be ready to depart as soon as you are able to arrange a suitable rendezvous with a ship heading back towards the centre of the Federation or to beam me to a Starbase. My task here is over. Live Long and Prosper." He saluted, Vulcan style, and left the Transporter Room. Picard followed him and set off to his Bridge.

In his temporary quarters, Spock vividly recalled the debriefing talk he had been given by his Captain seventy eight years, two hundred and six days ago, after they had left Dr. McCoy. The first thing Jim had said had been that time interval. He had added,

"You told me to tell you that."

"I told you. Captain?"

"You were there," Jim had explained. "You worked out how to get me back here. Don't ask me what you did, I doubt if I'd have understood if you'd told me! You were only visiting the ship. In fact you were there because you knew you had to be, to get me back."

"I see. On the Enterprise?"

"Yes." With a shudder.

"NCC-1701D?"

"I didn't ask that. Their Captain told you that much?"

"Affirmative, Jim. It was part of the data which tended to support his story. He told us virtually nothing else. I presume he realised the hazard of inducing changes in his history."

"I guess so, though I'm sure he's nothing like us. Spock!"

"Jim?"

"That ship! It was insane! The whole damned place was crawling with kids! There was even one on the Bridge!"

Poor Jim. The android and the Klingon had made very little real impression. The Betazoid with her probing mind, her attempts to invade the privacy of one's thoughts, for no reason and with no permission... Jim had not even noticed her. Well, in retrospect, he, Spock, had forgotten all about her once Jim was aboard, due to more urgent considerations. But all Jim had really been struck by was those children. Perhaps, on reflection, that was not so very surprising.

"Captain!" gasped Geordi LaForge as the turbo-lift opened, and Worf, beside him, hurriedly lowered his phaser.

"Sir!" Riker jumped up. "Are you all right? What happened?"

"I arrived on a previous U.S.S. Enterprise," Picard told him. "What happened here? I gather that Captain came in my place and was restored to his ship when I was returned here."

Riker gulped, as it impinged upon him that he had taken no command action and was not too sure what had happened.

"The Admiral..." began Geordi.

"He... er... took over," admitted Riker.

"He was the senior officer aboard," pointed out Worf.

"He seemed to know what was going on, Captain," added La Forge.

"He did know," Picard explained. "He came aboard because he knew. He was present on the vessel to which I was transported. Mr. Data, I believe all his work since joining us was designed to find out exactly what happened... some kind of warp or twist in time, so I understand. He couldn't explain to us because the incident was never logged. That's why he behaved as he did, ensuring that you couldn't observe his readings and denying you access to his programs."

"Never logged?" Riker asked.

"Any log would have been obliged to state that some members of the crew of that Enterprise knew certain details of the future..."

"That could have changed their future, couldn't it?" Deanna asked.

"Oh!" gasped Wesley. "So the Admiral couldn't order me off the Bridge! I'll bet that other one told him he'd seen me. He glared enough!"

"Wesley..." said Picard, who was rather too tired and drained for youthful high spirits. "Shut up."

"I think it explains..." Troi was musing aloud.

"Counselor?"

"Oh, Captain, when the Admiral came back here with the officer from the past, he was no longer cold. He wasn't pretending any more, was he? And it was as if his shield was warm, Sir... so warm..." Her smile was beatific. "It was wonderful!" she said. "Quite wonderful!"



Introduction to 'RETURN':

After writing 'A Twist in Time', I happened to have two friends to stay and they read the story. One was concerned about Spock. She agreed that he had been obliged to answer "I cannot tell you of your own future," when questioned by Kirk, and that this left it open to the reader to supply the answer which seemed most fitting to that individual. However, she asked me how I visualised Spock's life progressing. I gave her a quick verbal summary and she asked me to write this as a story. After reading the result, given to her at Sol III, my friend declared that she thought ScoTpress would like to publish it. I told her it was hers to do with as she wished. She showed it to Sheila and, to my surprise, I was asked to put it on a computer disc for ease of publication. What follows is that little addition to 'A Twist in Time'....

RETURN

written by Jacqueline Y. Comben
for Sue Jones, with love.
May you live long and prosper in peace.

Admiral Spock, on the last day of his accumulated Shore Leave, stepped briskly off the transporter platform in Vulcan Space Central and made his way to one of the refresher facilities. When he emerged a few moments later, he was wearing a very plain outfit in unrelieved black. He had not removed his uniform at the exact second when his resignation from Starfleet came into effect, but the timing was precise enough to satisfy his sense of fitness.

Ex-Admiral Spock located a Communications Console and called the owner of Vulcan Trading Vessel T'Mir. Computer checks had confirmed that the ship was not being offered for sale due to lack of reliability. She had an excellent record and the simple truth was that, having traded around the Federation for some years, the craft's owner had reached pon farr and had Ceremonised his marriage to the female after whom the ship was named. The living T'Mir did not wish to travel, so her husband had agreed to sell the vessel and confine his business activities to the surface of Vulcan.

V.T.V. T'Mir was equipped with Warp Drive, but was also small enough to land. Once he began an inspection, it soon became clear to Spock that it would be perfectly possible to adapt the engines to enable her to attain speeds equal to the best in Starfleet. The ship was within the size range he had wanted and the asking price was consistent with current values. This last was not surprising, since Vulcans did not indulge in the Human habit of trying to obtain excessive sums for merchandise. Spock had spent many years among his mother's people, but he still preferred to do business on Vulcan for that reason, together with the fact that the descriptions given of items for sale were accurate. He knew that the amounts he would be charged for engineering assistance, materials and supplies would be fair and that any work done would be done well and according to specifications. Why this was not always so on Earth, and why Humans worded advertisements to mislead, he had never quite understood. He had been receiving the salary of a Starfleet Admiral for many years and could afford what he now needed, but he could not afford excessive charges or workmanship which failed under test.

The Regulations relating to space-going vessels were detailed and unambiguous. Major refit rendered any craft liable for re-registration. Spock thought carefully on the subject of a name for the ship, and finally settled on Silver Lady, since Enterprise had been preempted by Starfleet. She was passed by the Vulcan Space Administration as space-worthy and classed as suitable for operation by one person, since she had ample automatic controls and Spock had improved her computer, not just to enable him to operate more sophisticated sensors than the original, but also to allow extremely complex manoeuvres to be pre-programmed. He intended to use this latter facility very early in his association with the little vessel.

Two days after passing her fitness tests and obtaining her Certificate of Registration, V.T.V. Silver Lady swept into an elliptical orbit of Earth and Spock located, with sensors, a small device which he had put in place some weeks earlier. He was able to confirm that this was in close proximity to the object of his real interest, who was alone. Unaware that he was swallowing convulsively, he set transporter coordinates and operated the controls.

A familiar figure, seated in a hover-chair, materialised on the single pad and Spock touched a switch which activated the next section of the computer's program. He relaxed slightly and only then realised that he had been somewhat tense.

"What the...?" asked James T. Kirk, sharply.

"Welcome aboard, Jim," Spock said, and advanced, hand held out. "Come. Walk with me."

Kirk stared and tensed, frowning. Then he realised that he knew his friend wouldn't joke on this subject. However, it took resolution on his part to accept the assistance and rise to his feet. As he did so, an expression of dawning delight replaced the frown on his lined face. His joints were no less arthritic, but at this gravity, so little effort was needed to move that he could walk.

"Explain!" he said and then, noticing Spock's clothes, "Have you left the Fleet?"

"Affirmative. Come." Spock led Kirk to the tiny Bridge with its two consoles, each combining a number of functions and each complete with a seat which tracked and swivelled as needed. "Take the Con, Jim," he invited, gesturing to the seat on the left, which was slightly in front of the other, at which he positioned himself, and from which he controlled navigation, science and engineering.

James T. Kirk sat down at the Con of...? He did not know what ship, but found that the console included the controls for helm and communications. He grinned, liking the situation so far, and said,

"O.K.... explain!"

"I was obliged to remain in Starfleet until I had returned your younger self... Jim?" as Kirk stiffened.

"What was it like?" Jim asked, despite his resolution not to. His younger self had surely been a man Spock would prefer to be

with?

"Meeting him? As if you had another son, one more like you than David. Of course, I had the advantage of knowing he would turn out well..."

Kirk choked with laughter.

"...but it was essential that I remained in the Fleet to send him back so that I could be sure of retaining you. I immediately gave the statutory notice of my resignation and I actually ceased to be a member of Starfleet one minute and thirty five seconds after reaching Vulcan Space Central..."

"Vulcan?"

"Yes. I had found, via the Holo-fax advertisements, a potential ship for us. Fortunately, she proved suitable and after minimal time spent in carrying out a few necessary adaptations, I was able to bring her to Earth and beam you aboard. I had planted a transponder in your chair before I left, in the hope that all would go as planned. I also sent a communication to your... to Hutchings, to explain your disappearance."

Kirk winced at part of that. Hutchings was a nurse and he hated the reminder of his lack of mobility. Then he took in the viewscreen picture and realised,

"We aren't in orbit. In fact we seem to be going at pretty high warp."

"Affirmative. We can manage Warp 9.9 in short bursts. I programmed the computer to take us on our way as soon as you were aboard. We have plenty of supplies..."

"We did have a few bits and pieces on Earth."

"True." Eyebrow flicking up.

Kirk cracked out a laugh,

"O.K., O.K., nothing I'll miss, thinking about it. Have you arranged to sell the lot?"

"Negative. Your things are not mine to sell. There is time to consider the best course. Now we have plenty of time."

The last sentence was said very softly, with immense satisfaction.

Kirk glanced at him sharply. Time was something that was running out on him, much as he hated to admit it. However... He tried turning off the computer control of his console and entering a very minor course change. He whistled.

"Did you say 'a few adaptations'?" he breathed, realising that his amazing Vulcan had rigged these controls so that his twisted fingers with their knotted, swollen joints could operate them easily.

He took a deep breath, thinking. He had walked in here. For the first time in years he was out of that damned chair and could walk more than a couple of agonising steps. He had learned to live

with the chair, but now it could be dumped out of the way in a storage hold. What gravity was on board, he hadn't checked, but it was just enough to make the deck 'down'. Here, his wrecked joints, the ones the doctors had refused to try replacing because they'd said he was too old to stand the strain of the operations, those joints had no work to do when shifting his body around.

"Jim..." Spock said softly, seeing the play of expression on his friend's face, "...your place is not and never has been upon a planet. Your place is at the Con of a ship, in space. You are as alert as you always were, as capable of command. It was not difficult to adapt the controls to render them operable despite the slight problem with your hands. In space, gravity is what we set it to be. In this ship we can trade materials of intrinsic value and low bulk. Dilithium is the most obvious example."

"We left orbit like a Manarkian sand-bat because I've been logged as medically unfit to command..." Kirk muttered, "...so we're breaking the law. Are we privateers?"

"Negative. In theory, this is a one-pilot vessel."

"Logged as yours. I see." Slightly bitter.

"Of course not. On Vulcan, where she is registered... her name is Silver Lady..." He saw Jim smile, and was glad to find that he had chosen well. "...she is logged as ours. She has been inspected and certificated as space-worthy. The logic of the situation is clear. On this ship, you are perfectly fit to command. It may be that certain Starfleet personnel will be dealt with most easily if I answer their calls, but considering our speed and where we are going, I do not expect us to be queried often."

"Where are we going?"

"Out there," said Spock, sweetly, gesturing at the viewscreen. "Thataway."



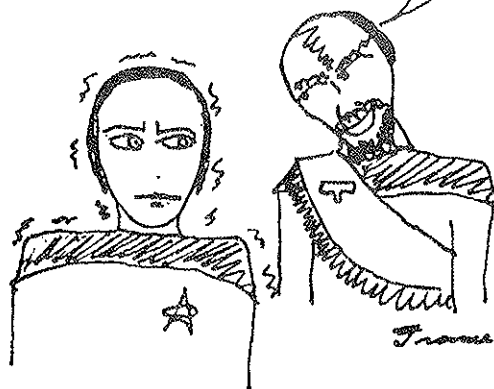
Shroud of Evil Revisited...

C'mon Data! I know
That isn't a real
oil slick. Where's
The dead seagulls?



Scenes we don't wanna
see... Worf purposely
antagonizes Data during
Yar's memorial service. (He
did this so he'd have an
excuse To practice The Klingon
choke hold...)

Say Commander, did you re-
member to bring the popcorn?



What's the matter with
you? Why can't I think
of more cartoons using you?

I'm not
funny. I'm
only an
android

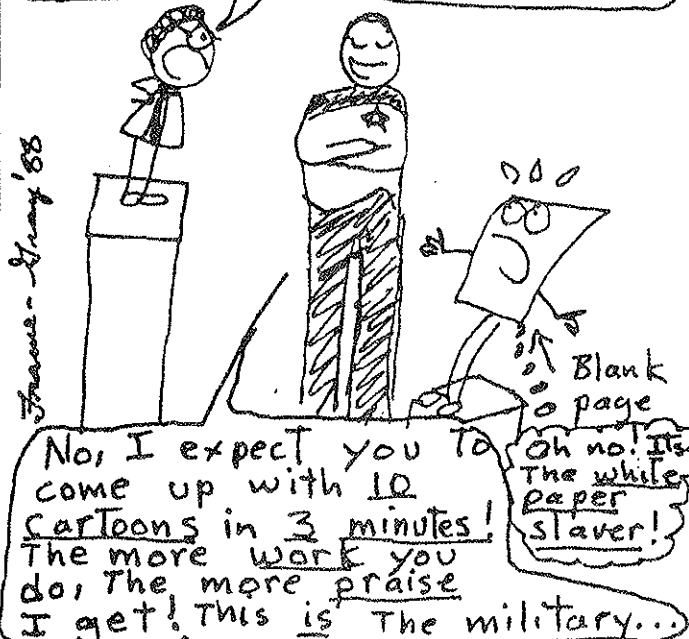
Say! why
don't you
make
brother Data
The star of
Slasher
movies?



Maybe such a role
would better suit
you, Lore!

Lore Trying out
The captain's
Throne -- chair
for size!

C'mon Commander Riker!
You expect me to come
up with 5 wonderful
cartoons in less than 5
minutes? Give me a break!



AN INOMINIOUS END

Dreamed by F.A.
Written by L.G.
Blue Jokes by The Gang

"Commander, I appreciate your concern but I hardly think a courtesy visit to Wenzelden merits a full-blown security alert."

"Neither does it merit complacency, Captain."

Picard halted mid-stride, turning to fix Riker with an icy stare which Riker met steadily, retaining his assertion that his assessment of the situation was correct.

"Go on," prompted the Captain, an iron edge to his tone.

Feeling very much as if he'd just leaped feet-first into a lion's den, Riker explained his misgivings about Picard's imminent trip to Wenzelden. "There have been reports of a terrorist group opposed to Wenzelden's membership of the Federation."

"Reports thus far unsubstantiated," Picard pointed out.

"All the same - no smoke without fire."

"Hmm." Picard resumed his journey to the transporter room. "Which is why I'm taking Lt. Ramsay." He paused as the transporter room doors opened. "It wouldn't do to make it appear as if we distrust the Zeldeniens, would it?"

"No, sir," mumbled Riker, following Picard inside. As the Captain stepped onto the platform, he reiterated his doubts. "I'm still not happy with this arrangement."

"Noted, Number One. Energise."

The transporter operated, leaving O'Brien to check his panels and Riker to seethe quietly.

His anger was still bubbling away as he left the room, causing him to reflect that, two months into his new assignment, he was still finding his feet when it came to parameters of authority. Sure, it was fine on paper; Captain does not beam down to situation considered potentially dangerous by either/or a) Captain, b) First Officer. It was not so cut and dried when the Captain in question was an old burrhog like Picard, who very diplomatically listened to his new First Officer then went ahead and did what he'd planned in the first place. All right, so maybe he, Riker, was being a little over-cautious, but it was his head on the block if something should go wrong.

The security man was not his first choice either, Riker recalled gloomily. Ideally it would have been himself or Lt. Yar, but he had to hang around for an expected priority transmission from Starfleet HQ and Tasha Yar was currently recovering from an impromptu bout of arm-wrestling with Data.

"Damn," Riker muttered angrily, earning himself a startled

glance from a passing crewman.

Up on the bridge, Lt. Worf looked up expectantly as Riker strode onto the command deck. "The Captain has arrived safely," he reported. "No further mention of the terrorist group."

"Fine. Keep me informed."

Half an hour passed without incident; an hour; but Riker was still keyed up. He sat tensely in the command chair, fingers tap-tapping the arm. His instincts screamed 'Danger!' and he knew he should be planet-side, not waiting here.

Then the expected happened.

"Commander," Data calmly reported. "A brief report just came through from an unidentified source."

Riker was up out of the chair and fixing the android with an eagle stare. "And?"

"I have no means of confirming the sender," Data began, ending quickly as he read Riker's expression, "but the gist of it is - the Ambassador and Captain Picard are under threat of attack from unspecified persons."

"Let's get down there!" sapped Riker, striding to the lift. "Worf, Data, with me. La Forge, you have the bridge!"

They arrived in the foyer of the main government building, snapping into action as soon as the beam filtered away. Riker headed for the reception area, oblivious of the startled looks and gasps directed towards the three armed Enterprise officers.

"Captain Picard and Ambassador Huugass - where are they?"

The Zeldenian on duty opened and shut his mouth in a universal sign of confusion. "Ah - um... they left the building two units ago. Um - that way..." His voice trailed off as the men hurried in the direction indicated and he looked round to meet an enquiring stare from his companion. "I don't know," he protested. "Who knows what Starfleet people do?"

The Starfleet people in question were currently pounding the pavement outside, once again drawing curious looks from multiple Zeldenians. Picard and Huugass were not in immediate sight, and Riker slowed his run to a jog as he came towards a junction in the path.

Data considered the four choices, each of which led towards a tunnel of carefully-tended foliage. "They may have taken any," he said, "and all are excellent venues for surprise attack."

"Wonderful," muttered Riker. "Worf, you take that one. Data, this. Keep your ears and eyes open - we don't know what form the attack will take."

"That still leaves one path unchecked," Data pointed out.

"We haven't time to play eeni-meeni, Data," growled Riker, hurrying down his chosen route.

"Eeni-meeni?" Data questioned, but he was alone and had more

important things to consider. He followed his path.

Riker was cursing himself for all the stupid, incompetent fools he could think of when a familiar figure ahead caught his eye. At the same time, a slight movement in the shrubbery to the left alerted him.

"Captain!"

Covering the last few yards in a spurt of speed, Riker threw himself in a tackle at Picard, one hand pushing Ambassador Huugass aside. He felt a sharp pain as he went down and as he rolled to one side, a deadly sharp disc sped by his ear. Riker fired his phaser back towards the movement he'd seen earlier. A cry told him he'd hit, and a roar of Klingonese announced the arrival of Worf. There was a flurry of thrown projectiles, phaser blasts and impacting fists, during which the non-combatants wisely kept their heads down.

The melee was over relatively quickly and Riker straightened from his crouch, feeling a sharp tearing in a sensitive part of his anatomy. A furtive exploration with his hand as he rose confirmed that one of the projectiles had embedded itself in his right buttock.

"That's all I need," he muttered, hissing as the offending article made its presence felt. He would have to wait until he reached the Enterprise and hope no-one noticed it before then. This was definitely a bad day.

Data emerged from the bushes to Riker's left, distracting the Commander from his embarrassing problem. "Where did you come from?" he asked curiously.

"The paths are ornamental in nature and, as such, double back on themselves," the android explained. "I was quite close when I heard your cry."

Riker looked to Worf. "You, too?"

The Klingon nodded as he unceremoniously dumped the two camouflage-robed Zeldenians he carried. "Some garbage, Commander."

Riker sensed rather than heard the approach of Picard, and he was not surprised to find the Captain glaring at him.

"What the devil's going on here?"

Riker cleared his throat. "Sir, we had a warning of an imminent attack on yourself and Ambassador Huugass."

"I see." Picard dabbed at a trickling cut on his forehead, the result of his unexpected impact with the ground when Riker tackled him. "But did you have to carry out your 'rescue mission' in such a melodramatic fashion?"

Oh, boy, thought Riker. "I didn't have time to explain, sir. I had no idea of the nature or place of the attack."

Picard's expression changed to one of sub-zero temperature. "And in your zealous haste it didn't occur to you simply to have us beamed up?"

Ambassador Huugass broke in at that moment, distracting Picard and enabling Riker to make sure his rear was not in view. It was sore enough, and he didn't want to add embarrassment to injury.

Data was suddenly at his side, watching him curiously. "Were you hit?"

Riker raised his eyes heavenwards, limping slightly as he tried to avoid Data's gaze. "Nothing too serious. I'll get it fixed on board."

"I think you should know - "

"Data - please... "

Before Data could say more, Picard gave the order to beam up the entire group and the android was caught in mid-sentence, his arm raised to get Riker's attention. When they arrived on the transporter platform, Riker tiredly stalled him. "Not now, Data."

As Data persisted, Riker hissed, "I don't want anyone to know - okay?" He followed Picard, directing Worf and Ramsay to take the stunned attackers to a secure cell. That done, he fielded Picard's *I'll-see-you-later* glance with a deadpan expression.

The Captain turned his attention to more immediate problems. "Ambassador Huugass, if you'd come this way... "

Data waited until the doors closed before announcing, "I do not think the Captain is very pleased."

Riker nodded, blinking when a wave of dizziness made his head do a solo flight around the room. "I think I caught him on a bad day," he said glumly, grimacing at another stab of pain from his wound.

"Oh." Data considered this for a moment, then recalled a matter of some urgency. "Commander, I think you should contact Sickbay at once."

Riker swayed slightly as he turned an enquiring eye on Data. "I don't think it's that serious, Data."

"I must disagree. When I examined the projectiles the attackers held on their persons, I noted a substance on the blades of the discs. It is possible - "

Riker groaned as Data fuzzed out of focus. "Data... I... Oh, hell... "

" - that they were dipped in some kind of poison," Data finished, expertly catching the comatose commander as he toppled forward.

Will Riker came to slowly, his thoughts fuzzy and a slight migraine pounding in his head. A cough forced its way up his dry throat and that was enough to catch the attention of the ship's CMO.

"Commander - Will - you're in Sickbay."

"No... kidding..." he croaked, opening his sticky eyelids only

to find his field of vision composed of a pillow and a wall. It occurred to him that he was lying on his front. He groaned as the whole unfortunate incident flooded back.

"Thirsty?" asked Dr. Crusher.

Riker nodded wearily, reflecting that it seemed to be his lot in life to end up in idiotic situations. He reached for the cup Crusher was handing him - and discovered yet another dent to his ego. "Tell me it's not true."

"I could, but I'd be lying," Crusher replied, laughter in her voice. "I'm sorry, but it seems to be a side effect of the antidote's use on Humans."

Why me? thought Riker, staring in disbelief at his kingfisher blue skin. He pushed up his sleeve hopefully, but the coloration reached up there to. "Is it all over?"

"Uhuh. It could be worse..."

Riker looked at her incredulously. "It could?"

"You could be dead," Crusher informed him without preamble. "If Ambassador Hugass hadn't been available to give us the name of the antidote, we might have lost you. As it was, the fact that the poison entered muscle slowed its progress to your heart." She lightly patted his rear. "Be grateful you've a well-padded tush."

"I'll be sure to put it on my qualifications list," Riker muttered. "How long will it last?"

"Not long," Crusher replied, not very convincingly. She turned away to greet a visitor. "Hello, Captain."

Riker dropped his head onto his arms. Of all the stupid, ridiculous positions to meet your Captain in... He tried to twist round to see Picard and trapped a nerve in his neck for good measure. "Captain."

Picard did not comment, which did not surprise Riker. Picard never, ever, let anyone know he was fazed by anything if he could help it. "How are you, Number One?"

"I'll live, sir." *But my credibility will be shot to hell.*

"Good." Riker's shoulder was briefly squeezed, then - "I'll see you when you're up and about, Commander." A slight pause. "Oh, you'll doubtless be pleased to know that the terrorists are awaiting trial for their attack. The Zeldenians are anxious to make amends."

"That's gratifying, sir."

"Mhmm. Now concentrate on getting better - we need you on the Bridge."

Riker listened for the Captain's departure before letting out a huge sigh.

"What was that for?" Crusher asked.

"I fouled up."

"Oh." She turned her attention to the readouts. "Well, I'm sure he's saving that until you're better."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

Four days passed before William T. Riker was pronounced fit enough to return to duty, four days of endless corny jokes and ribald comments about his much-maligned body. The worst culprit was a nurse who took it upon herself to stretch the boundaries of bad taste. Her repertoire ranged from "Touch of post-operative blues, Commander?" to "Feeling blue, are we?" and similar facetious comments. Riker was close to throttling her by the time he escaped.

His ordeal did not end there. A plethora of wisecracks accompanied him to his quarters, and afterwards, all the way to the Bridge. He stoically bore the interest, smiling good-naturedly while wishing there was a way for him to resume his duties without leaving his cabin.

Along the way he encountered Geordi La Forge, whose only comment was a rendition of "Blue Moon..." as he sauntered by.

Riker gritted his teeth and entered the turbolift. *Dignity*, he thought. *Dignity at all times. Wonder how the Captain does it?*

Yar was waiting for the turbolift to arrive. She greeted Riker with a welcoming smile and for one sweet moment he thought he'd get away with it. As she passed him, however, Yar muttered, "It matches your eyes..."

"Matches your eyes," repeated Riker sourly as he walked down the ramp. It did, but that was hardly the point. He noted the Captain was not on the Bridge, and directed his steps towards the Ready Room. He held up a peremptory hand to stay Data's inevitable remark. "Don't say a word."

Captain Picard glanced up as Riker entered, but still refrained from obvious observations. There was, however, a suspicious twinkle in his eyes when he welcomed his First Officer back.

"It's good to be back, sir."

"Naturally." Picard pushed himself up in his chair, pulling his uniform down as he came straight to the point. "There's something we should discuss."

"I thought there might be, sir."

"Hmm."

There was a lengthy pause while Picard appeared to be marshalling his thoughts. Riker was not fooled. He curbed the impulse to jump in first, and waited the Captain out.

"The incident on Wenzelden was not well handled, Number One," Picard finally said with deceptive calm.

Riker met his challenging stare. "I'm aware of that, sir."

"Then you'll also be aware it was a damned fiasco!" snapped Picard. "A simple warning via communicator would have sufficed. I

do not appreciate absurd heroics from my junior officers."

Stung by the dressing down, Riker stood his ground. "Captain, I know I acted hastily but it was a choice of spending time tracing you or being on hand to prevent a possible assassination. I chose action, and if you'll recall, sir, I did warn you beforehand."

Picard rose, stalking round the desk to stand before his First Officer. "So you did. And you consider my decision to go down a wrong one?"

Riker looked him in the eye. "Yes, sir, I do."

Picard's keen gaze travelled Riker's face, taking the measure of his young officer. "Touche," he murmured, breaking eye contact to circle round Riker to the opposite side. "No doubt you have something more to say on that subject?"

Riker kept his gaze fixed on the wall. "I do, Captain. It is my duty to ensure your safety at all times."

"By endangering your own safety with daring rescues?"

"I stand by my original intent."

Picard sighed, retracing his steps while shaking his head slightly. He paused, regarding Riker with a sideways glance of tolerant acquiescence. "Oh, do stand at ease, Riker, you're not on trial."

Riker's shoulders visibly relaxed but he was still ramrod straight as he watched Picard's progress back to the desk.

There was a flicker of amusement in Picard's eyes as he murmured, "A Catch 22 situation... One we will have to agree to differ on." He looked directly at Riker. "I think, however, we can agree that we were both equally to blame."

Faced with Picard's innate sense of fairness, Riker found a new respect for his Captain. He returned Picard's smile a little ruefully. "I'll try not to be so gung-ho in future."

"And I will try not to be so stubborn." Picard resumed his seat. "Now - haven't you some work to catch up on?"

"Yes, sir," beamed Riker, turning to go. He was caught mid-stride by Picard's mild enquiry.

"By the way, Number One, how much longer are you going to walk about looking like a sun-tanned Andorian?"

Riker flushed a delicate shade of indigo.



REPLAY

by

Scott Carrick

The Bridge of the USS Enterprise, NCC-1701-D, was quiet. Captain Jean-Luc Picard, rubbing his eyes, sighed and slumped back into his seat. The ship had just completed a gruelling 3-month mapping survey in a previously unexplored section of the quadrant, and although no new life forms had been discovered, several Class M planets had been surveyed; and two were found to be suitable for future Federation investigation and possible colonisation.

The Enterprise was now heading in to Starbase 127 for a well-earned rest. Picard was looking forward to two weeks' R & R - and he didn't need Deanna Troi to tell him that the rest of the crew were eager for a break too.

His reverie was suddenly interrupted by an urgent bleep from the arm of his chair. Hitting the communications switch, he responded, "Picard here."

"Chief Engineer La Forge here, sir."

"Yes, La Forge?"

"The engines have just stepped up their power output levels, Captain - at Warp 4 we should be using less than 15% of our total power capacity, but we've just begun to use 40% and the drain is still increasing - it now appears to be holding at 45%."

"What's using up that amount of power? We're still only at Warp 4 and we're not under attack."

"It beats me, sir - but I've put two engineering crews onto the problem, so we should get some answers soon."

"Carry on, La Forge - Picard out."

Picard frowned, rubbing his chin with one hand as he flicked off the switch with the other. 45% power output? That shouldn't be happening. 30% of the engine power was being drained off for purposes unknown - and he didn't like it, not one bit.

Mysteries gave him a headache.

"Data, what is our present position and heading?"

"We are in Sector 652,71, Quadrant 12, heading for Starbase 127 at Warp Factor 4, Captain."

The lights on the Bridge flickered, went out, then the emergency back-ups cut in.

"What the hell is going on?" Picard roared. Data shouted above the whine of failing engines.

"Sir, we are losing warp speed - we are now down to warp 3.8... 3.5... 3.0... 2.5... 2.0... 1.0... sir, going sub-light, now."

The steady background rumble of the warp engines gradually diminished as Data did his countdown. "Speed now stabilised at one half impulse power. At this velocity it will take us 7.329 months to reach Starbase 127."

Picard got the Engineer back on the intercom.

"Report, La Forge," he snapped irritably, in no mood for pleasantries. "We're now at sub-light. How?"

"Sir, there's now a massive power drain - the engines are now only receiving a trickle of power - about 5%. The rest is being diverted off elsewhere, but we're having trouble tracking down exactly where - it must be somewhere inside the ship, but all the bypass channels have been blocked and the circuit board's lighting up like a Christmas Tree. I'll let you know as soon as we've sorted out this mess down here."

"Make it so, La Forge." Picard turned to Deanna Troi. "Counselor, are you sensing anything? If there's an alien presence at work here, I'd like to know."

There was a puzzled expression on Troi's face. "I'm not sure, sir. I seem to be getting impressions of a powerful force at work here, but it seems to be cloaked or masked or something."

Picard turned to Riker.

"First Officer, evaluation and recommendations."

"Until we know what we're dealing with, I'd put the ship on Yellow Alert. If we are dealing with an alien force, we'd best be ready for the next move."

"Agreed. Worf - put all security forces on Yellow Alert, phasers set on heavy stun."

But there was no reply from Worf - apart from an audible grunt, the Klingon equivalent of a gasp of astonishment.

Picard turned to stare at the upper Bridge - and saw what the rest of the Bridge crew were staring at, mouths open and eyes wide in amazement.

Standing next to Worf at her old Security Station, dressed in her old Security Chief uniform, was Tasha Yar.

1

The Bridge was deadly silent. Everybody was staring at Tasha Yar.

Worf was the first to speak. "Tasha - what are you doing there?" he growled.

Picard, though shocked, was in no mood for conversation. "Security Officer! Set your phaser on stun - but don't fire unless I order you to!"

Although Worf was delighted at seeing Tasha again, he

remembered his primary duty was the security of the ship. In a second he had his phaser in his hand, pointed at Tasha - or what appeared to be Tasha.

The appearance of Tasha had affected the rest of the Bridge crew as much, if not more so, than Worf and Picard. Riker had a smile on his face, although he was extremely worried about what was going on. Troi had tears in her eyes. Wesley's mouth was wide open in astonishment, and Data didn't know whether to smile or look perplexed; his expression came out more like a frown.

Tasha spoke next.

"What - what's everyone staring at me for?"

Picard decided to be tactful, in case they were dealing with a superior force. He decided to address 'Tasha' directly.

"Er - hello, Lt. Yar. How do you feel? Tell me what you can remember."

"I - I'm not sure. I feel a bit strange - numb all over." She touched her arm, curious. "I remember beaming down to the planet with Data and Riker; we confronted that - vile thing that was holding Deanna hostage... what was it called?"

Data butted in. "You mean Armus, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, that was it. It refused to let her go, threatened us, I drew my phaser - went to fire - and - " Her face grew more puzzled. - "And I can't remember anything else. What happened?"

Picard talked slowly, and very, very carefully.

"You were - stunned, Lieutenant," Picard continued. "Luckily your phaser blast destroyed the... er, creature, and as you can see, Deanna is back with us, fine and well."

Tasha turned to look at Deanna; she smiled glassily. Deanna returned the smile, but she was worried; something was wrong. Picard went on -

"We brought you back to the ship, unconscious, but you soon recovered in Sickbay. But we're worried about these - 'blackouts' you've been having recently. Can you tell us what else you remember since then?" he pressed, fishing for clues to what was going on.

"I'm sorry, sir, I can't remember a thing since the planet. I'm trying to, but everything else is a blank. My mind is..." She frowned, eyes closed. "... Confused." She paused. "I'll try to remember. But I'm pleased to see you all again."

She smiled round the Bridge, at all of them. The crew tried to smile back at her, with varying degrees of success.

Picard spoke again. "Worf - you can lower your phaser, but remain alert."

"Yes, sir." Cautiously he lowered his phaser and returned it to his belt; but he kept his hand close to it. Worf wasn't taking any chances. His pleasure at seeing Tasha again was muted by his duty to the ship, his responsibility for the safety of the crew, and the fact that this couldn't possibly be the real Tasha he was seeing

- he had seen her die in Sickbay.

Turning back to her, he began to say, "Tasha, do you remember - " He stopped and grunted for the second time in five minutes. She had vanished, as suddenly as she had appeared.

The tension on the Bridge was electric. Several minutes had passed, and Tasha hadn't reappeared. Conversation had begun among the Bridge crew, but it was muted and strained.

"Riker, Data, Worf, Deanna. Meeting in the briefing room, now."

Picard and the four officers left the Bridge, leaving relief officers in their places. Wesley Crusher remained in his trainee navigator's position at the helm.

In the briefing room, they seated themselves around the main table.

"All right, I'd like your impressions of what we just experienced, and the possible threat to the ship. Deanna - you first. Did you sense anything from Tasha, or what appeared to be Tasha?"

"Captain - we all know that it can't possibly be the real Tasha - her physical body died. But the thoughts, the memory I touched was Tasha's - confused, incomplete, but definitely her memory. Although some 'force' seemed to be controlling her responses, what we just experienced was, to a certain extent, Tasha."

"In other words," Picard surmised, "what we just experienced was a 'ghost' with Tasha's memory, created and controlled by an unknown outside agency?"

"Until we learn more, that's as good a description as any."

Data interrupted. "Query, Captain - a 'ghost'?"

"Yes, Data - a non-corporeal supernatural manifestation."

"Ah," Data replied, still puzzled. "But I thought such things were merely primitive superstition and ignorance, with no concrete scientific foundation?"

"Yes, I agree with you, Data. But for the moment, until we get some hard facts, that is as good an explanation as any. Riker - any comments?"

Riker sat with his head on his hand, stroking his beard thoughtfully. "We're dealing with a total unknown here - so until we get some solid facts about what's going on, we should assume the worst. Possibly these manifestations and the power loss are the prelude to a takeover of the ship, a 'softening up' process if you will. We should keep the ship on Yellow Alert and beef up Security."

"Agreed. Worf, maintain the Yellow Alert. Security teams to patrol the ship, minimum of three per team. Phasers on stun, but do not fire unless physically attacked. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Worf replied, nodding. He stood and left the room, to implement a shipwide Security search for anything or anyone unusual. Picard rose to his feet, but remained leaning on the briefing table.

"I think that's all for now. Data, anything to add?"

"Supernatural manifestation or not, it was most... interesting to see Lt. Yar again," he said, a faraway look in his eyes. Picard could swear he was daydreaming, though he didn't know if Data was capable of such a Human emotional response; if not, he was a remarkable imitator.

"Data!" Picard snapped, then lowered his voice. "I meant anything to help explain or elucidate our present predicament," he hissed, using Data's own technical style of speaking.

"Oh, sorry, sir." His expression changed. "I believe I was... 'reminiscing'?" He frowned, puzzled.

Well, that answers my question for me, Picard thought. Riker laughed out loud. "A very Human emotion, Data."

Data smiled slightly, acknowledging Riker's compliment, then turned serious once again.

"So far I have been unable to evaluate a theory for the manifestation of Tasha. Regarding our loss of warp power, with your permission, Captain, I shall go to Engineering and assist Geordi in tracking down the power drain to its destination."

"Excellent idea, Data - you're dismissed. Let me know as soon as you find out anything. And Data!" Picard shouted as Data was leaving the briefing room. "No reminiscing!" he warned, mock seriously.

"No, sir. I shall be most..." He searched for the correct word. "Discreet?" The door slid shut behind him, to the sound of Riker and Troi, stifling their laughter. But Picard wasn't amused.

"All right, back to your posts; but keep alert. Deanna, I want to know the moment you sense anything else, all right?"

"Yes, sir - at once."

The three of them left the briefing lounge, and returned to the Bridge.

2

In 10-Forward, business was slow. Only two or three tables were occupied; most of the crew were either working the 'night' shift or sleeping in their cabins. Guinan had found it strange when she had come aboard the Enterprise that each twenty-four hour period was split in half and designated as 'day' and 'night' - on her planet, the days were two Earth weeks long, and sleeping was unheard-of - meditation and deep thought supplied all the relaxation her mind and body required.

During these quiet 'night' periods Guinan usually remained in the bar, although she did have a cabin she could retire to if she wished. There were always one or two people who turned up, even in the middle of the night; either night shift workers having a short

break, insomniacs or people who just wanted to talk. Guinan had a reputation as a good listener - although she wasn't a psychologist or Counselor like Deanna Troi, people liked to confide in her. After metaphysics, the study of people and their problems was her favourite subject. A prime example was the young boy, Wesley Crusher. She had helped him to make a crucial life decision, namely whether to stay on the ship or leave with his mother, who had been promoted to Head of Starfleet Medical. She hadn't forced him to go, or stay; she had merely pointed out the pros and cons of either decision, and he had made up his own mind. She never made choices for other people, that was wrong; she preferred to guide them in the direction best suited to them. Secretly she was pleased Wesley had stayed with the ship - she could tell it was the right choice for him, and for the Enterprise; he would make a fine officer some day. Since that time they had become firm friends, sometimes having philosophical and scientific talks that lasted for hours. But tonight Wesley was asleep, and although she was friendly towards the handful of people in the lounge, she could sense none of them was interested in deep and meaningful discussion, so after serving them she returned to her usual place behind the bar, lost in her own private thoughts and feelings.

Glancing up from the bar a short while later, she noticed a hooded figure sitting at one of the far tables over by an observation window. She was sure she hadn't seen the figure enter the lounge, and as nobody else seemed to have noticed, she decided to go over and find out if the person wanted anything from the bar, and also to satisfy her own intense curiosity.

As she got closer, she realised the figure was becoming more and more familiar; she hadn't yet seen the face, but the hooded gown and insignia were instantly recognisable.

"Can I get you anything from the bar?" she asked politely. The figure turned towards her, and for a brief instant she saw the distinct features of a middle aged man with white hair, beard and moustache and a wise and ancient face; it was a recognisable face, that of the person she had originally expected.

Guinan knew that he couldn't possibly be here, now; she knew there were strange and powerful forces at work here, but unlike a Human who would have been terrified or awestruck in such a situation, she remained perfectly calm, and accepted it. She was already beginning to form some answers to the questions in her head.

"I know you weren't expecting me," the figure said, "but please accept - I am here."

"I already have," Guinan replied. "What is it you want with me?"

The old man spoke again, in an ancient, wistful voice. "I can sense you would like to talk with someone, is that not correct?"

"Yes," replied Guinan, enthusiastically.

"I am here to talk with you. What subject would you like to discuss?"

Guinan shrugged. "Anything - though I don't suppose we could start by your telling me who you really are, and where you are from?"

"You will find out, all in good time," the old man replied cryptically.

"All right. You choose a subject for discussion."

The eyes of the ancient man gleamed with interest and intelligence. Guinan could sense something else - what was it? An intense curiosity, an unquenchable desire to know everything. She was learning more about her mysterious visitor all the time.

After a brief pause, he answered. "How about - metaphysics?"

"Fine. Let's begin."

The other people in the lounge had finished their drinks and had left; they were on their own. Guinan didn't feel in any danger from her unexpected guest; just a great curiosity and a desire to talk. They began; the talk went slowly at first, but soon picked up; within minutes they were discussing theories and concepts that even Guinan, for all her great age and wisdom, had barely touched on before. Later, during a brief lull in the conversation, Guinan turned and stared out at the stars. When she turned back, her visitor had vanished, as suddenly as he had arrived.

3

In Sickbay, Dr. Katherine Pulaski was sitting reading at one of the information consoles. Until an hour ago, things had been pretty quiet - and then she had received the call from Picard, telling her that the whole Bridge crew had just seen Lt. Natasha Yar - who had died over a year ago! At first she presumed it was some sort of macabre practical joke - but she knew that although Picard was a great joker off duty, as Captain he was extremely serious; and she knew from his psyche-profile that he would never joke about something like this.

She had never met Natasha - Tasha - Yar, but Beverly Crusher had told her all about her, and she had read the log and medical reports about her sudden and untimely death at the hands of a hostile alien creature.

There had been tears in Beverly's eyes as she had recounted the story to her, about how they brought her to Sickbay and the doctor frantically tried to save her life - to no avail. The trauma had been too great, and although the best medical treatment could not have saved her, Kate could tell that Beverly felt personally responsible for her death. Pulaski knew that Beverly and Tasha Yar had been good friends; she knew that Yar had been well liked by the rest of the Bridge crew as well, but particularly by the Klingon, Worf. At first Kate had found this rather unusual, but Beverly had told her that Tasha had been brought up on a remote frontier planet where government and law had collapsed, and she had lived by her wits and her cunning for years before being rescued - the psychological trauma must have been tremendous, and Pulaski knew now why Worf had become her best friend - they were both outsiders, trying to fit in and adapt to a strange environment. Kate was sad that she had never met Tasha; she knew that Yar had been one hell of a good Security Officer, and was still deeply missed on board the ship; she could tell that they would have been good friends.

After she got the call from Picard, her natural curiosity and stubborn determination took over. So Kate pulled out all the stops to try to find out what was going on. After examining all the

Bridge crew individually by tricorder, she checked through all their medical files, but could find nothing wrong with any of them, physically or mentally. That was just as she had expected; Starship crews were carefully chosen by rigorous physical and psychological tests - the Bridge/Command crew especially. Once she had cleared them all, she then began to explore the possibility that they were all suffering from a guilt complex concerning Tasha's death - that they believed themselves responsible and the subsequent stress manifested itself as a group hallucination. But she soon dropped that line of enquiry - there was just no way they could all have seen her at the same time; mass hysteria was not common on Starships, and she knew the Enterprise Bridge crew was one of the most stable in the whole fleet.

Her enquiries had now drawn her to the most likely cause - that the image of Tasha had been created by some outside agency. But what?

Bacteria, a virus - possibly a disease that caused mass hallucinations and didn't register on her tricorder, or an alien force? The list of possibilities was endless. She was now searching through past medical files and records to see if anything similar had been reported in the past.

Wearily, she rubbed her eyes with the knuckles of both hands. So far, nothing; she could tell this was going to be one of those days.

Tapping the page control, she suddenly heard a noise behind her. Whirling round, she saw a man sitting at the other console, dressed in the uniform of a twenty-second century doctor from Alpha Centauri. She gasped, frightened. No, she thought, *it can't possibly be him*. All this talk of hallucinations was starting to affect her now as well. She rubbed her eyes again, hoping the figure would disappear; but when she looked again, he was still there.

"Wh - what are you doing here? How did you get here?" Kate asked nervously.

"I'm sorry I startled you - I don't know how I got here. What is this place?"

Kate decided to give away as little as possible until she found out more about what was going on. "You're on the USS Enterprise, and I'm Dr. Katherine Pulaski. And I know who you are - or at least, who you appear to be."

"Really? And who would you say I am?" the person replied.

When Kate said the name, the man nodded. "Yes; that is my name - or at least that is who I think I am. But I am so confused. My mind is a blank - I can't remember anything from the past." The man frowned, searching for his memory. Then he looked straight at Kate. "But you are familiar to me, and so is your name. I'm sure we've met before."

Fascinated, Kate replied, "Would you mind if I ran a medical scan on you? Don't worry, you won't feel a thing."

"Yes, of course. Go right ahead."

Kate lifted her medical tricorder, switched it on and quickly

scanned her mysterious visitor, absorbing the results as they appeared on the tiny screen.

The figure spoke as she worked. "A small portion of my memory has returned, from watching you. I believe I am - or once was - a doctor like yourself. These consoles and that device you are using - " he pointed at the tricorder - "are very familiar to me. Would I be correct in that assumption?"

"Yes," Kate whispered, smiling. "You were - are - one of the best. Would you excuse me for a moment? There is something very important I have to do."

The man nodded, smiling.

She leaned over and pressed the desk intercom.

"Sickbay to the Bridge. This is Pulaski." Before she heard Picard's reply, she looked up.

Her visitor had gone.

4

Down in Engineering, Data and Geordi were trying to solve a mystery - but due to the seriousness of the situation they weren't using their Sherlock Holmes/Dr. Watson personas. They knew the power wasn't leaving the ship, as the inner hull sensors would have detected such a massive leak into space. It was definitely being diverted to some other part of the Enterprise; the problem was tracking it down. The engineering boards and power relay circuits were totally blocked, or were functioning erratically; Geordi felt sure somebody or something was doing it on purpose, to make it harder for them to solve the problem. As Chief Engineer, it was his responsibility to get the warp engines back on line; he was determined that he would succeed, even if it was the last thing he did.

Data had told Geordi all about seeing Tasha on the Bridge. After an initial show of disbelief - "Are you developing a sense of humour, Data? Because if you are, it's pretty sick!"

"No, seriously, Geordi, I am relaying to you the absolute truth - remember, I never lie."

"No, I don't suppose you do. But it's still pretty fantastic..."

"You think so too? I also thought it 'pretty fantastic' to see Tasha again."

Geordi burst out laughing until tears were streaming down his face. "No, Data; you don't understand. I meant it was a pretty fantastic thing to happen here and now. How did the rest of the Bridge crew take it?"

"They were also most surprised. We still haven't discovered the cause; I believe Dr. Pulaski is working on it right now. I also am at a loss to explain her appearance; until we amass more facts, all our theories are mere shots in the dark."

Geordi looked at Data strangely. *Shots in the dark?* Where had he picked up a phrase like that? *Certainly not from me*, he thought;

probably Picard or Riker. "Data, I hate to say this, but you're becoming more and more Human every day."

"Do you really think so? Why, thank you, Geordi!"

Geordi laughed again, even harder than the first time. Data looked at him, puzzled, then grinned stupidly.

Once he had recovered, Geordi became more serious and intent. "I'm only sorry I wasn't up there on the Bridge with you all. I'd love to have seen Tasha again, no matter what made her appear."

"Yes, Geordi," Data murmured thoughtfully. "It is a great pity you missed seeing her; I am sorry for you."

Do you know, Geordi thought, I believe he means it, too. Data is more Human than any of us thought.

Smiling at his android friend, Geordi turned back to the wall panel. They both returned to their detective work, examining the engineering boards in great detail. After a few minutes, they were so deeply absorbed in their work that they didn't even sense the presence behind them.

Picard was rubbing his temples in frustration. The situation wasn't dangerous, but something very strange was going on, and Picard was determined to get to the bottom of it. The whole Bridge crew had seen the image of Tasha Yar; at first he had thought it was stress and tiredness after a long and exhausting mission, but he doubted that was the cause. Dr. Pulaski had found nothing wrong with them, so Picard was now convinced they were dealing with an outside agency. As if to confirm his suspicions, Kate had just contacted him from Sickbay and told him that she too had just had a 'visitation' - that of Dr. John Suzmann, a famous surgeon from Alpha Centauri who had revolutionised the technique of laser surgery. She had told him that Suzmann, or at least the manifestation she saw, had no memory apart from his name and the fact that he remembered being a doctor at one time.

Just like Tasha - no memory.

But what did it all mean? Picard was annoyed; he was sure there was only one clue missing, and that when he got it he would have solved the whole mystery - but for now, it eluded him. Pulaski had run a tricorder scan on the image, but the readings just didn't make any sense - as though something were controlling it, affecting the machine's function.

He didn't like it; not one bit. And as time was going on, all they were getting was more questions and no answers. So far, these images hadn't harmed anybody - but who knew what might happen next? Picard wasn't taking any chances, and had stepped up the Security Patrols. He was impatient to hear the latest word about the engines, but he knew La Forge would contact him as soon as he discovered anything. Riker had gone off duty half an hour before, as the ship didn't appear to be in imminent danger, and he knew his First Officer was exhausted. Picard decided to go to his cabin to write up his personal log; he left the Bridge, leaving Worf and Lt. Chang in temporary command.

Geordi studied the engineering boards for several minutes, then turned to check the engine output levels. He stopped in his tracks, startled, and stared at their latest unexpected visitor. Tapping Data on the shoulder to attract his attention, Geordi continued to stare.

Data first of all looked at his shoulder, believing something was wrong with it and Geordi was merely pointing it out to him. Finding nothing wrong, he next looked at Geordi questioningly, then turned to see what Geordi was staring at. Data was surprised to see who their visitor was. Standing behind them, looking around in awe and wonder, was Professor Moriarty.

He was so interested in his strange new surroundings that it was several seconds before he addressed the duo in front of him.

"Good day, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson -- or should I say Data and La Forge?"

"You remember us?" Geordi whispered hoarsely.

"Yes, of course. But where is this? And how did you manage to bring me here?"

Data began to say, "This is the Enterprise's eng..." But Geordi cut him short. He didn't want Moriarty to know more than was absolutely necessary about the running and control of the ship. He had seen what that device Moriarty had built in the holodeck had done to the vessel -- who knew what might happen if he discovered how to control the engines or affect life support? Geordi decided to lie.

"We're -- ah -- still in the holodeck. This is a reconstruction of one of our ships of the fleet."

Moriarty smiled, but his eyes betrayed his disbelief.

"Mr. La Forge -- you may be an excellent technician, you make a passable Dr. Watson, but you are not a very convincing liar. Your friend --" he nodded at Data -- "gives too much away."

Geordi grimaced at Data as if to say, 'You've really done it this time!'

Moriarty continued. "So this is the engine room of your vessel? Fascinating; I never realised it was so vast or complex! You must teach me all about its workings. What powers it -- electricity?"

"I'm sorry," Geordi replied, "I can't tell you."

"Can't or won't?" Moriarty said, suspicious.

"That's for you to decide."

"You forget, Mr. La Forge," Moriarty continued, a hint of anger in his voice, "that I learn very fast. Pretty soon I may not need your assistance." Moriarty's last statement chilled Geordi to the bone. He had seen what the machine Moriarty had built in the engine room had done to the ship -- who knew what he might be able to do if he gained control of the warp engines or life support? For the moment he remained curious rather than dangerous; but Geordi wasn't taking any chances.

Calling Data aside, he moved out of earshot of the Professor but kept a wary eye on him all the time.

"Data - I want you to distract Moriarty while I call Security. We can't have him loose on the Engineering deck; he may be dangerous."

"My thoughts precisely, Geordi - he is learning more all the time. I shall take him to the observation port - will that be sufficient?"

"Fine, Data - fine. But don't tell him too much."

"Do not worry, Geordi - my mouth is shut."

Geordi couldn't help laughing at Data's misquotation of the phrase 'my lips are sealed'. Data still had a lot to learn about language if he wanted to become more Human!

Geordi went over to the nearest wall intercom to contact Security while Data took Professor Moriarty over to the small observation port on the other side of the Engineering deck. As he pressed the button which raised the shield over the window, Data spoke to the Professor.

"This is one of our observation windows, from which we can observe the space outside our vessel."

As the window opened, giving a view of the surrounding starfield, Moriarty gasped in amazement. He had never seen so many stars; there were thousands upon thousands.

Moriarty gasped. "So I was right," he said in an awed whisper. "You do live inside a vast vessel, travelling through a great nothingness. And the stars - I never knew there were so many!"

"Yes, there are countless numbers of stars and constellations - and we have only explored a tiny fraction of the total number."

"Astounding. And you travel from one star to another in this vessel?"

"Yes." Data knew that this information wouldn't give Moriarty any more power than he had already - it was only if he asked more detailed questions about the running of the ship that Data would politely refuse to answer.

"But the distances involved are incomprehensible - even I know that!"

"Yes, they would appear to be, to someone of your time. But this vessel is able to travel faster than the speed of light."

"Preposterous!" Moriarty laughed, incredulously. "Even Jules Verne never dreamed up such fantasy. Nevertheless, I cannot deny that we do appear to be out in space, so I will accept your explanation for the time being."

Data was fascinated that a character from the pages of fiction had heard of a real Science Fiction writer from the nineteenth century. When he asked him where he had heard of Jules Verne, Moriarty frowned.

"I don't know; but the name is familiar to me. My mind is confused, and my memory not whole; I can remember certain things clearly, but there are many blanks. Also I know many facts that I didn't previously know - such as who Jules Verne was. I also know things about this ship that I didn't know before - and I'm learning more all the time."

This time it was Data who was concerned. Although Moriarty had great intelligence and understanding, he was grasping concepts that should be beyond his mentality - and Data was convinced that this image they were seeing was being produced and *controlled* by an outside force. Data decided to try and get more information out of the image.

"Professor Moriarty, there is something I've been meaning to ask you. Can you remember anything since the last time we met? Any thoughts or memories?"

Moriarty paused for a moment and then shook his head.

"No, I am sorry. The last thing I remember is saying goodbye to you all in the laboratory in Old London Town before you - how do you say? 'Deactivated the program'?"

"Yes, that is correct." But Data was concentrating on other things - he was beginning to formulate a hypothesis about what was going on. Ever since Tasha had appeared on the Bridge he had considered the possibility, but it had appeared to be too unlikely, too unbelievable. But now that they had met Professor Moriarty as well, Data was convinced he was right. He had to talk to Geordi urgently; there was no time to waste. "Excuse me for a moment, Professor. I wish to discuss something with my colleague."

Leaving Moriarty at the viewport, Data hurried over to where Geordi was just finishing his call to Security; he had asked for three armed guards to come to Engineering to put Moriarty under restraint. "I do not think that will be necessary, Geordi," Data said as he flicked off the intercom.

"Why not, Data?" Geordi asked, curious.

Data proceeded to tell him his theory, briefly. At the end of it, Geordi said, "Well, it's a long shot, but you may be right. I was beginning to think along the same lines myself. If you are right, it'll save us a lot of legwork. By the way, Data, where's Professor Moriarty?"

"I left him over by the viewport. Why?"

"Well, look for yourself."

Data turned and looked.

Professor Moriarty had vanished, just as Tasha had done.

"The Professor's disappearance only confirms my theory, Geordi. I believe we should contact Captain Picard immediately, tell him what we suspect, and ask him to meet us there as soon as possible. Are you in agreement?"

Geordi nodded, his face grim.

Wesley entered "10-Forward" and took his usual seat at the bar. "Hello, Guinan!" he called out eagerly, seeing her over at a far table, serving some customers. She saw him and raised her hand in acknowledgement, indicating that she would be with him just as soon as she could. Wesley didn't mind waiting; he was dying to tell her about seeing Tasha on the Bridge, but it could wait.

He had grown fond of the strange alien bartender in the last few months, and enjoyed his frequent visits to the bar. He didn't come to drink; occasionally to eat, always to talk. Guinan was a great talker, and also an attentive listener - in fact, she was the best all-round conversationalist that Wesley had met. Their discussions ranged from daily life aboard the ship to theories concerning the formation of the Universe, and covered just about everything else in between. It was only when Guinan started talking about complex philosophical and metaphysical topics that Wesley got lost - possibly such talk was common on her home planet, but Wesley was convinced that the greatest philosophers on Earth would have a hard job understanding her at times. Fortunately, Guinan was also an expert at holding her audience - when she saw Wesley couldn't follow her train of thought, she could swiftly change the subject, redirecting the flow of the discussion into other areas.

Wesley came swiftly out of his daydream when he saw that Guinan had returned to the bar. Guinan spoke first.

"Hello, Wesley. And what can I do for you today?"

"It's all right - I don't want anything from the bar. I've come to talk - I've got some rather interesting news for you."

"Yes," she said. "I can tell."

Tasha had cropped up in many of their previous conversations, so he didn't need to go into a tiresome explanation of who she was. Quickly he told her what had happened. She was very interested in what he had to say, but she didn't appear surprised in the slightest when he told her that the whole Bridge crew had just seen somebody who had been dead for over a year. Wesley had grown accustomed to her apparent lack of reaction to his stories and tales over the past few months - nothing seemed to startle her. Perhaps this lack of outward reaction was common among her people - Wesley didn't know for sure. When he had finally finished, Guinan dropped her bombshell.

Wesley couldn't believe what Guinan told him; no wonder she didn't react to the news about Tasha!

"But I've been talking about Tasha for ages - why didn't you interrupt me earlier to tell me that you had seen somebody as well?"

"Because I was interested in hearing your story; and besides, you never asked me."

Wesley realised she was right. He had rushed into the bar and blurted out the whole story without once asking her if anything out of the ordinary had happened to her; or giving her a chance to speak; and Guinan was too polite to interrupt.

He still had a lot to learn about the art of conversation - Guinan had taught him a valuable lesson, and he was grateful. *Maybe she had planned it all along* he thought - Guinan was an expert at such things. As well as being a good conversationalist she was also a good psychologist - she could feed you information or teach you lessons without your even being aware of it.

Wesley was amazed. He thought he had begun to understand what made her tick - but things like this just proved to him that he barely knew her at all. Every time he came to the bar he told her another chapter of his life story - but he didn't even know one page of hers. It wasn't just that she never talked about her background - whenever they spoke, any little thing she did give away was so trivial or meaningless that he couldn't learn anything from it. Most of what little Wesley knew about her he picked up from studying her mannerisms, way of speaking and the thoughts and ideas she came up with - and usually her ideas were so vague, complex or just plain weird that he could learn nothing from them. Wesley likened her to an alien chameleon - constantly altering her personality and even her mind to suit whatever situation she was in. All the different personality traits and conflicting mental thought patterns simply made him more confused.

But it wasn't only Wesley who had this problem understanding Guinan - the only other person on the ship who was as close to her as he was was Captain Picard - and although he had known Guinan for many years had told him that he still knew very little about her. Although he knew it might take a long time, Wesley was determined that he would come to understand her completely - eventually. Most of the fun was in the finding out anyway - but for the moment she remained a great mystery, an unanswerable enigma.

Wesley decided that he was more interested in her mysterious visitor, and he asked Guinan to tell him exactly what happened and who she had seen.

"The image I saw was that of Philosopher Turogah, the greatest intellectual who ever lived."

"Wasn't he from your home planet?" Wesley interrupted.

"Yes; but he lived over two hundred years ago, and I was very young when he died."

Already Wesley had made a connection between this image and that of Tasha; they were both dead. He didn't know whether it was important or not, but he filed it away in his memory in case it turned out to be important.

Guinan's next statement fascinated him as well.

"Although the image resembled Philosopher Turogah, at first it looked like somebody else."

"What?" Wesley croaked.

"At first it looked like somebody totally different, somebody I had never seen before and didn't recognise. Then the next moment I was speaking to Turogah."

"How did the image change?"

"I do not know - it only took a second. Maybe its mask

slipped."

"You say it, Guinan - could you sense it was a life form?"

"Oh yes - a highly advanced life form or life forms - I couldn't tell if there was only one or a whole lot."

"Did you learn anything else?" Wesley asked, fascinated.

"Apart from the great intelligence, I could sense something else; it - or they - have a great yearning - a need to know or find out something, I don't know what. I lost the impression shortly after it changed to resemble Turogah. But these images are somehow connected with the over all purpose. We talked at some length about advanced metaphysical topics, some of which I barely understood myself - I could tell that the image understood it all, and was only trying to gauge the limit of my understanding. It disappeared shortly afterwards, before I could learn any more; perhaps it couldn't find what it was looking for in me. Who knows?"

If anybody knows, she does, Wesley thought. He found it hard to believe that *anything* could know more about metaphysics than Guinan - but in this case something apparently did. All they seemed to get were more questions and no answers.

But Guinan wasn't finished yet. After pausing for a moment, she looked at Wesley, and her large, mysterious brown eyes gleamed, and Wesley could see hidden, untold secrets in her mind.

She spoke.

"There is something I forgot to mention, Wesley - it is something so unexpected that I didn't consider it was relevant at first. But I now believe that it is vitally important, and could very well solve this whole puzzle."

"What is it?" Wesley whispered excitedly.

But instead of telling him, she merely smiled and said -

"I don't think I need to tell you, Wesley - you know the answer yourself. In fact, you've known it all along - you just never realised. Just think; the answer will come to you."

During the entire conversation, Wesley's mind had been working very fast, trying to figure out what was going on. Suddenly it all clicked into place - *Guinan is right*, he thought. *I did know it all along. I was just so concerned with the main facts that I overlooked the minor elements.* The key to this mystery didn't lie with the alien or aliens; the most important fact was the trivial and simple, though not very obvious, connection between the two images they had seen.

He smiled at Guinan; she smiled back. He knew he was right. *What a typical thing for Guinan to do*, he thought. *She probably knew the answer was in the back of my mind all along, but instead of telling me, she helped me to find it by myself.*

Thanking her, he left 10-Forward and headed for the nearest wall intercom; he had to talk to Geordi and Data urgently. *At last we're getting somewhere*, he thought; the mystery was far from solved, but at last they had a good lead.

Wesley didn't know it, but down in Engineering Geordi and Data had already come to the same conclusion.

6

Riker was lying on the bunk in his cabin, but he couldn't sleep - his mind was too active, trying to work out what was happening on board.

Reports had come in from different parts of the ship that images had been appearing to members of the crew - nobody had been attacked or injured in any way, and the images only lasted for a few minutes before disappearing again. Picard seemed determined to find out what was going on, and before he had gone off-duty, it felt like he was taking his frustration out on Riker - *or maybe I'm just getting paranoid*, he thought. Riker was exhausted; he had been on Bridge duty for the last 18 hours. But now that he had the chance to get some sleep, his brain wouldn't let him - his mind was full of questions that needed answers, and he knew he couldn't rest until they had worked out what was going on.

Suddenly he got the distinct impression that he wasn't alone in the room. Opening his eyes, he sat up on his bed. "Lights on," he ordered. Gradually the room lights came on, until they were at their full intensity. Although the lights had come on slowly to give his eyes time to adjust, he still blinked at their intensity.

As his eyes became accustomed to the brightness, he looked around the room, eyes coming to rest on a figure sitting at his work desk.

Oh, no, he thought. *This can't be happening - it must be a dream.*

But it wasn't. Sitting at his desk was a beautiful dark-haired girl in a red dress. The sight of her brought all the painful memories flooding back; although it had been over a year ago that the Binar had hijacked the Enterprise, it felt like yesterday.

"What are you doing here, Minuet? Is it really you?"

She smiled at him. "Hello, William. It's been a long time."

Then she looked around the room, and doubt and uncertainty clouded her features. When she spoke, her voice sounded nervous and frightened. "But where are we? This isn't where we met before - what is this place?"

"You're in my cabin on board the Enterprise - that is the ship on which I serve. Minuet, can you remember anything since the last time we met?"

She frowned in concentration, biting her lip.

"No. I - I'm sorry, William. I cannot remember anything since we last met. How did I get here? I'm so confused..."

She's just like Tasha, Riker thought. *She has no memory.* Suddenly he hesitated. *No - this cannot possibly be her. It's just a cheap trick conjured up by some alien force for some unknown purpose.* Angrily he got up from the bed and moved across to the desk where the image of Minuet was sitting.

"All right!" he shouted, looking first at the image and then around the room. "I don't know who you are or what you're trying to do, but I want you to stop playing with my emotions and show yourself - your true self!"

But it was the image of Minuet that spoke.

"You know who I am, William - I'm Minuet, of course. Who else could I be?"

Furious with the charade, Riker shouted, "No you're not - you couldn't possibly be here! Show your real self now - we're tired of the stage show!"

He went to grab the image's arm, but his hand closed on thin air. Minuet had vanished - he was alone again.

He was still reeling with the sudden shock of seeing Minuet again, but was clear-headed enough to remember that the images, illusions or whatever they were experiencing, could pose a serious threat to the ship - and as First Officer, his duty was to protect the Enterprise and her personnel. Leaving his cabin, he walked to the nearest turboclift and headed for the Bridge.

Picard dimmed his cabin lights, sat down at his desk, switched on his reading lamp and began to write up his report. Although the Bridge log kept records of everything that happened on board ship, he liked to keep his own written account of important events. This wasn't just in case anything should happen to the ship's log memory file, and a second account was required - it was mainly for his own satisfaction. Picard knew that the chances of the ship's log being destroyed were negligible; there were numerous backup systems and the information was stored on several erase-proof computer disks. Keeping the written log was habit to him - ever since his first command, the Stargazer.

Maybe I'm just old fashioned, he thought. *Or maybe I'm just old,* he added wryly, smiling to himself.

Picard certainly felt old - this last surveying mission had taken a lot out of him; and now with the latest problems aboard ship, he was beginning to feel his age. *Perhaps it's time I retired,* he thought. *Back to a nice quiet life in a little village outside Paris.*

But almost as soon as the thought of leaving the Enterprise entered his head, he changed his mind. No - there was still so much to see and discover out here - he couldn't leave the ship, not yet anyway. The lifetime ambition of Earth's most famous explorers was still with him - the overwhelming desire to know the unknowable, to explore the unexplored. The Universe, or at least this small part of it, was still a mystery to Man - and as long as he was able to command a starship, Picard knew he would be out here, in the vanguard, pushing back the frontier - just like those old adventurers did centuries before.

Returning to the present, Picard sighed and carried on writing his report. Within a few minutes he was deeply engrossed in his writing. Concentrating on the report, he didn't notice the two figures standing on the other side of the room, hidden in the shadows. Then, hearing a slight noise, he glanced up and saw the

two outlined shapes in the halo cast by the lamp.

"Who's there? Come on, show yourselves!" Picard demanded, squinting into the darkness.

There was a deathly silence for a moment, and then the two figures stepped forward into the light.

Just like Geordi, Data, Wesley and Riker before him, Picard knew the source of the ship's problem as soon as his latest 'guests' showed their faces.

"Well, I can't say I'm pleased to see you, Dixon Hill, Picard, or whatever your name is. After the way you tricked us, I think you deserve what's coming to you!"

It was Cyrus Redblock and Felix Leech. Leech was holding a gun pointed directly at Picard's chest. Picard groaned; not these two clowns again! Slamming his hands down on the desk in anger, Picard jumped to his feet.

"Look, I don't know who or what you are - and I'm not talking about these two dime-store hoodlums you've conjured up. Just stop this charade and tell me what you want from us!"

But it was Redblock who spoke. "Dime-store hoodlums, eh? I can't say I like your tone of voice!" It was his turn to get angry. "Stop fooling around, Picard! You disposed of us real neatly the last time - I thought I was dead; but we're back now, I don't know how, and frankly I don't care. You've tricked me once too often - nobody gets a second chance, Picard, least of all you. This time you're going to be the one to die - and I shall enjoy every moment. Au revoir - you were a worthy opponent, but this is where you bow out. Mr. Leech, you can kill him now."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Redblock - I've been looking forward to this!"

The gun came up, and was aimed straight at Picard's head. The desk lights glinted off the barrel as the petty criminal pulled the trigger. Picard didn't know whether the images could kill him, and he wasn't taking any chances; a second before the gun went off, he dived down behind his desk.

The gun shot reverberated around the cabin. Several seconds passed. Picard hadn't been hit, and he hadn't heard the bullet hit the wall behind his desk. Cautiously looking over the top, he saw that the room was empty.

Although the images of Redblock and Leech hadn't frightened him, the thought that the gun and bullets were real and could kill him had. He knew they were insubstantial, harmless - and it was time to switch them off - at the source.

Before he had time to reach the door, the desk intercom beeped. Crossing the room, he switched it on.

"Picard here."

"This is Riker, sir. I'm back on the Bridge. La Forge and Data would like to see you at the main holodeck computer control, urgently. It would appear that the holodeck is producing these images we're seeing - though don't ask me how."

Picard interrupted. "I know, First Officer - I've just met some very interesting people."

"I met someone rather... interesting... myself, sir," Riker replied hesitantly.

"All right, Riker - I'm on my way. You have the con."

Picard wasn't surprised in the least that Riker had also seen an image - there would be some interesting stories to tell when all this was over. Switching off the intercom, Picard left his cabin, and set off towards the holodeck.

7

When Wesley made the connection between the appearance of Tasha Yar and Philosopher Turogah, it seemed so simple that he wondered how he could have overlooked it.

It was simple, but it wasn't obvious - that was the reason. For the holodeck to be able to project holographic images into other parts of the ship seemed to break every physical law in the book and even some that weren't. Wesley was fascinated to discover what the alien force was, and how they had achieved such a feat - and for what purpose. When Guinan had told him to think in 10-Forward, the answer had come to him quite quickly. He suddenly remembered that Guinan had created a holographic representation of Turogah several weeks before, in order to have complex discussions with it - Wesley had thought it rather strange, but that was the way she relaxed. And she had saved the programme. Tasha's image was also still in the Memory Bank, in the form of her last will and testament, which she had made before she died - an alien intelligence of sufficient power and complexity, once it had 'projected' these images, would be able to make them say or do whatever it wanted. But they still didn't know what they were dealing with and what it wanted - but at least they now knew where to look.

Wesley tried to contact Geordi and Data in Engineering, only to find that they were already on their way to the main holodeck computer control on deck 9. *They must have had the same idea*, he thought as he headed there himself.

When he arrived, he could see Data removing the main wall panel which contained the computer controls, as Geordi tried to contact Picard at the nearest wall intercom. Geordi nodded to acknowledge his arrival, and Data filled him in on what he was going to do. Geordi switched off the intercom and came over to them.

"Riker's on the Bridge - Picard's gone to his cabin to write up his report. He said he'll get in touch with him and tell him to come here as soon as possible."

A moment later, Worf and two armed Security men arrived. Geordi had called them, just in case they got into trouble. Worf motioned at his men to move back, and the three of them stood at a safe distance, phasers at the ready.

Within a minute, Picard also arrived. He came over to the group huddled around the wall panel, and asked Data what he thought the problem was.

"I believe that the power from the engines is being channelled into the memory storage circuits, and the only way to prevent more

images being produced is to remove the memory storage chips."

Data spoke to all of them, not once taking his eyes from the panel in front of him, his hands moving very fast within the guts of the computer. Then he stopped momentarily.

"I have removed the cover of the memory storage section. With your permission, Captain, I will now remove the storage chips."

"Quite so, Data," Picard said. "Does everyone agree?" Geordi and Wesley nodded in agreement. "We have a unanimous verdict. All right, Data, carry on."

But before Data even had time to remove one chip, a booming voice broke out, a voice which seemed to come from everywhere at once and caused the ship to shake violently.

"DO NOT REMOVE THE MEMORY CHIPS - WE FORBID IT!"

Picard nodded for Data to proceed, and he yanked out the first chip. There was a bright flash and explosion, and Data was blown across the corridor, crashing into the opposite wall. He slid silently to the floor, eyes closed.

"Data!" Geordi shouted, dropping to his friend's side. Wesley also went to help him.

Picard shouted at the air around him.

"I don't know who or what you are, but your last actions show that you are belligerent and hostile, and although we prefer the ways of peaceful contact, we will defend ourselves if you harm any more of us. Do you understand? You will now let us remove the memory chips!"

"NO!" the voice boomed, even louder. "WE WILL NOT ALLOW IT!"

"Security Chief!" Picard shouted at Worf. "You will destroy the memory files on my order!" He did not want to destroy the computer, but it seemed the only way to end this fiasco.

Worf raised his phaser, aimed it at the wall panel, and prepared to fire. He looked at Picard, but the Captain never had time to give the order.

Suddenly, blocking the way between the Security team and the computer was one of the nightmarish beasts that he and Riker had fought in the holodeck several weeks before. Raising its horrific skull-like head, it let out an ear-splitting roar of defiance and prepared to lunge at Worf. Although visibly shaken, the Klingon stood his ground.

"It's all right, Worf!" Picard shouted. "It's only an illusion. Fire through it!"

Worf aimed his phaser at the beast and fired. Nothing happened; his phaser hadn't worked. The two Security men also tried to fire, with identical results. An instant later, the horrific beast vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

The booming voice began again, but this time it was accompanied by a glowing ball of white light which had suddenly popped into existence in the middle of the corridor. It pulsed in time to the

voice, and bobbed up and down with a life of its own.

"WE ARE THE AROS," the voice began. "WE HAVE USED YOUR HOLOGRAM DEVICE TO RECREATE THESE STORED TRACE IMAGES IN ORDER TO OBSERVE YOUR HUMAN EMOTIONS AND REACTIONS, WHICH WE HAVE FOUND MOST ILLUMINATING. WE TEMPORARILY DEACTIVATED YOUR WEAPONS TO PREVENT YOUR DAMAGING THE HOLOGRAM DEVICE. THESE IMAGES WERE MERELY CREATED FOR THE PURPOSE OF OUR TESTS, AND COULD NOT CAUSE YOU ANY SERIOUS HARM. WE HAVE COMPLETED OUR TESTS, AND WILL LEAVE YOU NOW; WE THANK YOU FOR YOUR CO-OPERATION."

"But you have caused us harm!" Picard snapped. "You have seriously injured one of our number, the being known as Data."

"AH YES - THE TIN MAN. I BELIEVE YOU WILL FIND THAT HE HAS NOT BEEN SERIOUSLY HARMED; JUST SLIGHTLY SHOCKED."

Although the voice was the same, the tone was different - and Picard noticed that 'WE' had suddenly changed to 'I'. There was something very strange going on here. Frowning in puzzlement, he turned to see Data being helped to his feet by Geordi and Wesley.

"I'm pleased to see that you are uninjured, Data," Picard said, concern in his voice.

"I appear to be undamaged, sir; I received approximately 40,000 volts of electrical current, but my circuits managed to absorb it without any serious overloading." Looking at all of them, Data continued, "But I believe if any of you received such a shock it would prove fatal - therefore I should be the only one to touch the holodeck controls."

Geordi butted in, mock sarcasm in his voice. "There you go again, Data - thinking you're superior to us Humans!"

"In this respect I am, Geordi - though I do not believe it makes me superior - just different," he replied, deadpan. Geordi didn't know whether Data was joking or serious.

While Data and Geordi were talking, Picard's mind was hard at work. He was thinking about the last sentence uttered by the 'Aros'. At first he had considered it strange that the pronoun had changed from 'we' to 'I' - but he had discovered something stranger within the sentence. Referring to Data, the Aros had said that he wasn't harmed, just 'slightly shocked'. They could have meant it literally - but Picard got the feeling that they/it meant it as a joke; and he found it very strange that an unknown alien race would be playing practical jokes on them. He wasn't positive, not yet, but he had a hunch about who was behind all this. He decided to play that hunch.

Addressing the group as a whole, Picard spoke.

"Gentlemen, this charade has gone on long enough. I think it's about time we unmasked our 'unknown alien race' to find out who is really behind this."

Data, Geordi and Wesley, not following Picard's train of thought, all said "Captain?" in chorus.

"I don't believe we are dealing with 'The Aros' at all - or any other unknown alien race for that matter. In fact, I believe we have met this particularly obnoxious and annoying character several

times before in the past."

Data, Geordi and Wesley all wore puzzled expressions. Instead of explaining further, Picard turned and addressed the glowing ball of energy that was still floating in the middle of the corridor.

Although he wasn't positive, Picard decided to go for broke. "All right - the game's up. We've had enough of your childish pranks - we know who you are. Stop hiding behind this - " he waved his hand at the globe - "mask. If you have any spine at all, you'll show yourself. Or are you scared to appear, now that we've spoiled your little game and shown you up for the charlatan you really are?" He was trying to goad the presence into showing its true self; if it was who he thought it was, they shouldn't have long to wait.

He was right.

The booming voice broke out for the last time. "CERTAINLY, MON CAPITAN - IF YOU DO NOT LIKE THIS FORM, I SHALL APPEAR IN THE MANNER TO WHICH YOU HAVE BECOME ACCUSTOMED."

There was a blinding, soundless flash and the glowing energy ball vanished to be replaced by a familiar figure dressed in a Starfleet Captain's uniform.

"As I thought - Q!" Picard roared angrily. Data, Geordi and Wesley gasped; Worf and the two Security men tried to fire their phasers, but they were still useless.

They were once again at the mercy of the Q-being.

8

Q was the first to speak; he addressed Picard directly.

"We meet once again, my dear Captain Picard. I can't say I'm pleased to see you, but necessity is the mother of invention. Now you see me in my true colours - Starfleet red!" Looking down at the uniform he was wearing, Q grimaced. "In fact, I'm lowering myself below my true station in life - "

There was another bright flash, and Q was decked out in a Senior Admiral's uniform. "There - that's much better. R.H.I.P., Captain!"

Picard ignored Q's gloating mockery of the Starfleet hierarchy. "What are you playing at this time?" he demanded angrily.

"Tsk, tsk. Temper, mon Capitan. You could call it excessive 'Q-riosity'; after our last meeting and the Riker debacle, I was in a spot of bother with my fellow Q. In fact, that fiasco almost got me banished to another level of the Q-continuum; only my skills of negotiation and cunning prevented a disaster of cosmic proportions."

Well, I see he hasn't lost his knack for gross overstatement, Picard thought - it was just a pity he hadn't been banished! "In other words - " Picard spoke slowly to let the words sink in - "you pleaded with them to let you have a second chance - you told them you would be a good little Q from now on and they let you off the hook?"

"Do not mock me, Picard!" Q was angry - angrier than Picard had ever seen him before. "The ways of the Q are as advanced beyond your level of consciousness as you are beyond a microscopic bacterium. We could wipe you out in the blink of an eye!"

"So why don't you, then?" Picard mocked. "If you're so mighty and all powerful, and we're so pathetic and ignorant as you keep telling us, why not just finish us off now? I'll tell you why - because you're scared of us - scared of what we are and what we will become, given time - and the rest of the Q would have your hide if you harmed us, wouldn't they?"

Q blustered. "Nonsense!" But Picard knew he was right; he could tell from Q's reaction. Not even Q could mask the truth. "After careful consideration, I've decided to let you live for the time being. But do not mock me again, or you will feel the wrath of the Q!"

Picard knew it was all show; Q wouldn't destroy them even if he wanted to. But he thought it best not to antagonise him too much at this point. Feigning submission, Picard said, "I apologise most sincerely, Q."

Q smiled, deadly calm again. "Good, that's better. Do you see how much better we get on when we're civil to each other?"

Picard wondered if Q was schizophrenic - if such a condition was known among his race, he was certainly a prime example. Or maybe they were all like that. As an afterthought, he thought *I hope not!*

Q continued. "As I said, the other Q allowed me to return, to continue my tests. The game this time was too important for me to make any errors as before." Picard noticed that he used 'errors' rather than 'mistakes' as Q carried on without pausing. "So I concealed my true identity until my test had run its course. By the way, Picard, what did you think of my final coup d'etat - the Aros? Possibly my greatest deception ever!"

"No," Picard replied. "I thought it was childish and stupid. We are not here to cater to your pathetic whims and fancies, Q - we are interested in contacting *real* alien life forms, not imaginary creations conjured up by your sick mind!"

"Well, I don't care if you didn't like my disguise - personally I thought it was a brilliant idea!" Q replied haughtily. "It certainly fooled you for a while," he continued. "Whether you like it or not, Picard, when I give the orders - everybody jumps!"

"No," Picard sighed. "You're just an egotistical joker. When you play your little games, you trick us into performing, just like circus animals trained to jump through hoops."

Q smiled. "An interesting analogy, Picard, but not really accurate. Anyway, back to the matter in hand."

"Yes - why have you returned to bother us again?" Picard was intensely curious. "Haven't you learned enough from us yet?"

"You underestimate your pathetic little species, Captain. The Q can always learn something new from you - even if it is only your own weaknesses to be used against you later on." But Picard could tell that wasn't the reason for Q's return.

"It was just a simple little test, but quite important. If you are ever to reach the level of the Q, and even beyond, there are several things that you pathetic savages must possess, as a race. Two of the most important are intelligence - and I don't just mean the intelligence to build this ship and all your other primitive technology. I'm talking about the intelligence to see round problems, to overcome the obstacles in your way using your mind - without having to resort to science and technology. Maybe the power of thought would be a more suitable description."

"And the other?" Picard demanded.

"Ah, yes - the other. The other is what I have returned to test you for - it is closely related to comprehension and the power of thought - in fact, it is a logical extension of it. It is the power of empathy; compassion and understanding, not just for other species - but for the Universe as a whole."

"But the Federation is living proof of what you have just said, Q; I.D.I.C. is a fact - we live by its philosophy every day. That is nothing new to our species or our alliance."

"True, Picard - but you grasp the mere basic fundamentals of what I am trying to tell you. We the Q are looking for something *beyond* that - not just to be able to live in peace and understanding with others, but the ability to see *beyond* the physical shell to the very centre of the being, the 'soul' if you will, and to be able to guide that being onto the path best suited for it, whether they realise it or not."

Picard found Q's explanation difficult to follow, but he had a faint idea of what the alien was getting at. "Would I be correct in assuming that this is what the Q are trying to develop in us - or the reason you keep coming back to test us - to try and find out if we have the potential for it?"

"Precisely, Picard. Until you evolve these abilities, the great secrets of the Universe will remain closed to you. Once you have discovered and developed these skills from within yourself, nothing will be beyond your grasp. You will be on the path to becoming gods yourselves!"

"What, you mean like you?" Picard sneered sarcastically. "Frankly, I think we would be better off without them, if we were to turn into something like you."

Instead of being angry, Q looked sad and shook his head.

"That reaction is typical of you, Picard - how little you understand!"

Picard ignored him and carried on. "You speak of metaphysical concepts, Q. Besides - it took us millions of years to reach where we are today - what you talk of could take millennia more!"

Q's eyes gleamed. "Metaphysics to you, maybe - but reality to more advanced life forms. The Q see a potential within you - that is why we have let your species develop naturally, without interference. To destroy you would be a crime against the Universe - if you live up to our expectations we may decide to adopt you - groom you for 'stardom', so to speak!" Q laughed at his own joke.

Picard couldn't help smiling, the idea seemed so preposterous

to him - the Human race as the children of the Q!

"If we ever reach the level you speak of, we may actually be superior to you and might no longer need your help. Have you considered that, Q?"

Q smiled knowingly. "Ah yes - every species has the same precociousness in the beginning. We shall see, Picard; time will tell!"

He was sure it would.

While the Picard/Q conversation was going on, Wesley, Data and Geordi stood in a group, listening to the exchange. During a lull in the conversation, Geordi decided to butt in and ask Q a question.

"How did you make the holograms appear outside the holodeck, and what did you do to the engines?"

Q turned to him and spoke as if to a young child. "It was quite simple, really. I merely rerouted your puny engine power into the holodeck mechanism to supply the energy required, tapped into the memory files, chose the holographic images I wanted, then boosted the image until I could make them appear anywhere on the ship whenever I wanted them."

"But why didn't you use your Q-power to project the images - surely as advanced a being as yourself could have done that easily?"

"Yes, that is true; there are several reasons I didn't use my full power. Firstly, by diverting your engine power I slowed your vessel enough to prevent you reaching your destination before my tests were completed; secondly, to distract you and give you a little mystery to solve; and finally so I wouldn't have to reveal my true identity too soon, which might also have ruined my tests. Frankly, you didn't do too well in solving the mystery - I virtually gave the answer away myself!"

"Maybe - but I knew it was you that was behind this!" Picard exclaimed.

"True - but you took so long to decipher that - a sandbat of Manark 5 could probably have done it quicker!"

Picard decided to ignore Q's facetious comment. There were still many important questions that he wanted answered.

"Q, why did you produce these images of people we knew or created from fiction? What could you possibly learn from us by making these images appear to us?"

Q looked amazed. "You really don't know, Picard? Why, you surprise me. I thought even your pathetically small mind might be able to decipher that one."

Picard spoke through gritted teeth, his anger barely constrained. "Just tell us, Q!" he hissed.

"By making these images appear to different members of the crew, I was merely testing your emotional reactions and intelligence. As I said before, these are the most important factors you require if you are ever to develop into an advanced life form. I made different images appear to different people, depending

on how important or relevant that character was to them - that is why Tasha Yar appeared to you all on the Bridge, and Moriarty to Data and La Forge in Engineering. Some, such as Tasha, were to test emotional response; whereas Moriarty was to test intellectual reasoning. If you are ever to reach the level of the Q, we have to know if you are temperamentally, emotionally and intellectually suited to assume the role of gods."

"Is that all? You made us relive painful memories merely to learn more about our emotions and levels of intelligence? Yet again, Q, you've shown a complete disregard for Human well-being; we're no better than laboratory mice to you, to be used and abused in any crazy experiment you think up!" Picard knew he was over-reacting to the situation and that Q didn't mean them any harm - in fact, he knew that Q was concerned for their future welfare. But he wanted to make it clear that he couldn't just play around with them whenever he felt like it.

"No point in losing your temper, Picard - it won't make the slightest bit of difference. I can return to test you whenever I feel like it - and there is absolutely nothing you can do to stop me."

"Yes, there is - we could simply refuse to co-operate in your stupid experiments!" Picard countered.

"And that is why I used the holograms to obtain my results for me. I knew that if I appeared in my usual form, you would simply have got angry and refused to participate - as it was, you took part without even being aware that you were being tested. And voila! I obtained the results I required with no problem. You all reacted exactly as expected!"

Picard knew that Q was right. It didn't matter whether they co-operated or not; Q could trick and confuse them every time.

"Well, Captain, are you interested in hearing my results?"

Frankly, he thought, I'm not bothered. He decided to remain silent.

"Well, I'll tell you anyway. You were a great disappointment to me; you may have advanced technically and physically, but emotionally and intellectually you are barely out of the Stone Age. When I produced the image of your old Security Officer on the Bridge, your reactions were typical - initial amazement followed by happiness or confusion."

"And what was wrong with that?" Picard demanded.

"Oh, nothing, nothing. But not one of you made the emotional/intellectual connection that what you were experiencing might have been a hologram. You still haven't learned to combine the two; you were so overwhelmed with emotions that you failed to think clearly - and that is why it took you so long to work out what was going on. I expected that from old macro-head - "

"The name is Lt. Worf!" The Klingon growled in Q's direction, eyes blazing, knuckles white as he gripped his useless phaser more tightly.

Q ignored him. "But the rest of you were no better. By the time you had deduced that the holodeck was the source of the

problem, I had given you so many clues that a trail of breadcrumbs couldn't have been much clearer. I thought you might have solved the mystery during your talk in the Briefing Room, and yet again you disappointed me. All those great minds working together, and all you could come up with was 'Put the ship on yellow alert, search for intruders and trace the power leak' - Not one of you thought of the holodeck! At one point, when you mentioned 'ghosts', I thought you were going to make a fundamental breakthrough and discover the answer - but you never make the connection between the metaphysical and the real world; and the mystery remained a mystery."

"But even without your help we would have got around to the holodeck eventually," Picard protested. "We've never experienced a hologram manifestation outwith the boundary of the holodeck before - until now. Such a concept has been purely hypothetical. How can we consider such hypothetical causes before we have discovered any concrete facts to support such an assumption?"

"Exactly, Picard; you have answered your own question! Until you learn to make that hypothetical leap, to develop your minds beyond their present level, until the hypothetical, the unbelievable, becomes as real, as concrete as the physical world around you, you will remain mental infants."

"Humph!" Picard snorted. "You're talking about metaphysics again!"

"Yes." Q's eyes glinted. "The wheel turns full circle."

"By the way, Q, I understand how you created the image of Tasha Yar - you merely accessed her last will and testament programme, that she had made in the event of her death. But how did you manage to produce the holograms of Redblock and Leech? The last time we met them, they stepped out of the holodeck and faded away; we thought they were erased from the programme's memory."

Before Q had a chance to answer, Data interrupted. "I believe I can answer that question for you, Captain, without Q's assistance." Picard nodded for him to do so, and Data continued. "Although the holographic images were destroyed when they left the holodeck and you later cancelled the programme, you will remember that the computer's memory storage facility has a bypass memory circuit which retains the code prefix number for every programme that has ever been created. It would have been relatively easy for a being of Q's mental powers to find this code number and thereby re-create selected portions of the Dixon Hill programme, even down to individual characters."

Q looked pleased with Data. "Well done, tin man; although you are of no value to me or my fellow Q, you show greater reasoning and intelligence than these pathetic primitives. Maybe I should be studying you rather than them!"

Data was about to say 'Thank you' to Q for the compliment, but stopped himself in time. He merely smiled slightly, a pleased look on his face. Geordi hissed, "Don't get too big-headed, Data - remember what we're dealing with here!" Data's smile faded and he nodded at Geordi, serious once again.

"Do you mean to say - " Picard spoke evenly, his face grim - "that you re-created Redblock and Leech for the sole purpose of scaring me - and to see what I did in such a situation?"

"Picard, you are such a dim-witted dullard! Of course - they were formidable characters - I simply couldn't resist such a confrontation!"

"And you made Leech shoot at me?" Picard roared angrily.

"Yes, yes - your fear reaction was most fascinating to watch, especially when you ducked down behind your desk - most funny, in fact!"

"But I thought I was going to die!"

"Nonsense - it was only an illusion. It couldn't do you any harm; and besides, if you had known the gun was harmless it would have ruined my results - you wouldn't have reacted with fear at all. It was a fascinating reaction - quite the funniest I've seen!"

Picard looked as if he was going to have a fit. All he managed to say was, "I didn't know the bullet was unreal - I could have died from shock!"

"Nonsense - you're here now, alive and well. As usual, dear Captain, you over-reacted to a perfectly harmless situation - it's the story of your life!" Picard lapsed into an enraged silence as Q continued, "And as for Riker - he was an even bigger disappointment. When I projected the image of his old holodeck L'amour, he got angry! What a savage dimble-brain he is - he didn't react at all properly."

Picard had calmed down somewhat; though he remained grim and tight-lipped. *Just as well Riker isn't here just now, he thought. He'd tear Q limb from limb - that is, if Q actually has any limbs at all!*

Picard began to mull over what Q had just said - and it triggered off something in Picard's brain. It wasn't much, but at last he had something to use against Q.

"Yet again, Q, you have shown a complete disregard for this vessel and those aboard it - all you're interested in is your damn silly games and tricks! I don't care if none of my crew was physically hurt - you're a hazard to our health! And as for your latest little 'test' - as you yourself just said, we didn't react at all like you expected - and do you know why? Because you're so full of pompous egotistical ideas and theories that you've forgotten what you really came here for in the first place. We didn't react as you expected or wanted - because you still don't understand us at all!"

Q was surprised at Picard's heated attack, and for a second after the tirade stopped, he looked unsure of himself. Good, Picard thought - *that's the first time I've ever seen him look like that - I must have got to him at last!*

It was the same old Q that answered, but there was an unexpected edge to his voice. "Nonsense, Picard. I know you better than you know yourselves. You cannot bamboozle me with doubletalk!"

But Picard could sense that deep down he had hit a raw nerve - was Q unsure of his whole purpose for the very first time? Picard hoped so.

When Q next spoke he had seemingly recovered; and he addressed all those present. "My little test is at an end, dear friends, and

"I shall shortly be leaving you."

This statement was met by a hearty chorus of "Good!" from all those present, with several other expletives thrown in for good measure; Picard was sure he heard something in Klingonese, but he couldn't be positive.

"But - before I go - " Q turned once again to Picard.

"You, Captain, and your Neolithic First Officer no longer interest me. You are too narrow-minded, and although Riker did show some promise in the past, he is also trapped in the military mentality; just another cog in the wheel - no imagination, no insight. The rest of your Bridge crew are no better - apart from you - how do you say - 'Counselor'?"

"You mean Counselor Deanna Troi?"

Yes. She interested me greatly at first; on the bridge she displayed a great empathic ability, and she almost managed to reveal my identity too soon. But her mind is clouded with emotions; although she feels and understands, she is swamped by the emotions of others; she cannot control them, channel them. Therefore she also is not suitable."

"So you will leave us alone now, for good?" Picard said hopefully.

"No - I have not finished. There *is* one member of your crew who still interests me greatly; the mind is vastly complex, almost mystical in many respects - it can see beyond the here-and-now to past and future events, and can assist and channel the powers of others without then even being aware of it. In fact, the individual has all the personal qualities that I came here to find."

"Who is it?" Picard groaned, realizing that they hadn't seen the last of Q.

"Ah, Captain - that would be telling!" Q's eyes glinted mischievously. "You will find out soon enough!"

Picard sighed, fed up and tired. "Just for once, Q, I'd like to teach you a lesson in good manners. It's a pity I can't create holograms of other Q who would be programmed to come and remove you from this ship - for good!"

Q laughed loudly. "What an interesting concept, Captain - that's the most intelligent idea you've had since we first met. There may be hope for you yet!"

Although exhausted, Picard managed a wry smile. He knew there was hope for himself and for the whole species - he could sense it. *How ironic*, he thought; *I've probably learned more from Q's own reactions than he has from us!*

"I have one last thing to do before I leave your ship; someone I must speak with. So I will take my leave of you now.

"Au revoir, Captain, until we meet again!"

Q smiled and then, to Picard's astonishment, he saluted him! Although Q denied it, Picard knew he had made an impression on him at last; whether that was good or bad, time would tell.

Q suddenly vanished, to be replaced by the glowing ball of energy which floated up to the ceiling and popped and disappeared, like a bubble bursting.

Picard looked up to see it vanish. Echoing Q's final words, he muttered, "I'm sure we will, Q; I'm sure we will."

9

Guinan wasn't in the least surprised when the hooded figure appeared at the far table for the second time; in fact, she was expecting him. She walked over and said, "Would you like something from the bar this time?"

The figure turned in its seat, dropping the hood. It was the face that she had glimpsed before; that of a middle-aged man with strong, intelligent features and curly brown hair; the face that had 'changed' to resemble Philosopher Turogah.

"No, thank you, Guinan. I'd rather speak with you personally. Please sit down."

Guinan sat opposite the figure, resting her elbows on the table and stared into his face. She smiled knowingly. "And what would you like to discuss this time, imitator of Turogah? Advanced metaphysics, perhaps?" she questioned, her voice filled with sarcasm and mocking.

Q replied quickly, straight to the point. "No; I'd prefer a personal heart-to-heart talk. How did you know I wasn't Turogah?"

Guinan smiled even wider. "Possibly the fact that I programmed that simulation of him into the holodeck only a few weeks ago - right down to the robe you are wearing; or the fact that he has been dead for over two hundred years!" Guinan joked, not once taking her eyes from Q's face.

Q was fascinated. "You knew straight away that it was a hologram projection?"

"Of course; I saw straight through the image to the one you are wearing now."

"Image? So you can tell this is also not my true identity - a mask to disguise my true persona?" Q was amazed.

"Yes. Do not ask me how I know - I can just sense it. Usually with my customers I can see their desires and deepest ambitions - but with you it is different. I can tell you are very curious about the Humans aboard this ship, and the Human race in general. There is something you need or are trying to get from them, but I cannot tell what."

"Yes, Guinan; you are quite correct. That is why I created the holograms which appeared to them. But I could tell you were different, superior; that is why, when I first appeared to you, I was as I am now but I wore the image of Turogah. Your mind is so perceptive that you saw straight through the image to the one I wear now. Truly remarkable."

Q leaned closer, excited and intense. "Tell me, Guinan, who do you really think I am?"

Guinan's eyes grew wistful. "I cannot tell, not precisely. You have a vast and complex mind - very powerful and intelligent, but unorthodox, unruly. And you are not alone; I can see other minds at work, beyond your own - some weaker, some stronger."

"You see rather than sense?" Q pressed.

"It is just an ability, difficult to express in words." Guinan shrugged nonchalantly.

"And where do you think I come from?" Q was very interested now.

"From beyond that which is - from another Universe, another dimension."

"And that prospect doesn't frighten you?" Q asked.

Guinan's wistful expression disappeared, and she stared at Q, a smile on her lips. She shook her head. "No: I can tell you're harmless."

Q was astounded that this being, though not endowed with great power as he himself was, could be so incisive and wise. "You are not from the Earth or its Solar System, and I can tell you are far advanced beyond the Humans on this vessel. Why do you serve a race of witless savage children?"

Guinan thought carefully about her answer before replying. "If you're referring to the rest of the crew, I do not 'serve' them, though that term is sometimes used to describe my function on board this ship. I prefer to call it helping or guiding them in the direction that is most beneficial for them and the rest of the Universe, and which will develop their potential to the full."

"You believe they have potential?"

She looked at him sadly; Q found it strangely unnerving. "Of course - in ways even you do not seem to understand."

For the first time in his long existence, Q was worried. When Picard had told him that he had got it all wrong, that he had misinterpreted the Human race right from the start, he had experienced a brief moment of doubt that had quickly passed. But to hear the same thing from a being who in many ways might develop into something superior to the Q caused him great anxiety.

Doubt began to flood into him; he had felt unsure of his purpose before, but he was beginning to realise that all his games, all his tests, were really pointless, just a way to satisfy his intense curiosity, and all he had come up with were some meaningless answers and even more questions about the enigma that was the Human condition. He needed to retire for a time, to re-think his entire strategy, his whole way of dealing with Humans. He knew it was going to be complicated, and he knew the other Q weren't going to like it; but it had to be done. Q had to come back again - he was now more curious about the Human 'problem' than he had ever been before, and he was fascinated by this being known as Guinan.

Q looked at her. She was staring out at the stars with a strange smile on her face; he could see mysteries and a vast intelligence and wisdom hidden behind those dark brown eyes. Could she read his mind? If she could, she would know that the intense

curiosity, the need to know and understand which fuelled the Q, would bring him back here again to this ship, to unravel her great mystery and secrets, and to test those 'promising' Humans once again.

"Well, old wise woman," Q addressed her directly. Guinan didn't turn, but her smile widened a fraction. "It is time for me to leave; our discussion has been most - illuminating." He knew it had been more than that - it had astounded him. Guinan could sense this, and turned to look at him.

"Yes - it has been most enjoyable. By the way, the next time we meet, no disguises, all right?"

"All right. No disguises." Q was stunned by her boldness.

"I shall say 'au revoir' for now, but not farewell - for I am sure our paths will cross again."

With a final quizzical smile, he vanished into thin air.

Guinan turned and stared back out at the stars. She knew he would be back, and looked forward to his return.

EPILOGUE

On the Bridge, things were returning to normal. Glad to be rid of Q once again - how he wished it was for ever! - Picard allowed himself a wry smile. It had been an eventful day.

"Well, Riker, hopefully that's the last we'll see of Q for some time."

"I certainly hope so, sir - he's the sort of character you can only take in small doses."

"Very small doses, First Officer," Picard corrected him.

"Yet in some ways, Captain, his visit did have some beneficial effects."

"How so, Riker?"

"Well, I got the chance to see somebody I hadn't seen in quite a while, and we all got to see Tasha again, in a certain sense. That can't be a bad thing - it's not often you can actually thank the Q for his actions!"

Picard nodded, understanding. "Quite so, Commander."

Data, at the helm, turned in his seat. "I too was most pleased to see Lt. Yar again, sir - it was a most rewarding experience." He turned back to face the main viewscreen.

Smiles broke out around the Bridge at his comment.

"We all were, Data, we all were," Picard replied. "Set course for Starbase 127, warp factor 4."

"Yes, sir."

"Engage."

The Enterprise went to warp speed, and headed off to her next adventure.



IT'S OVER

It's over.
Everything's returned to normal,
Sliding back into its usual place.
So am I.

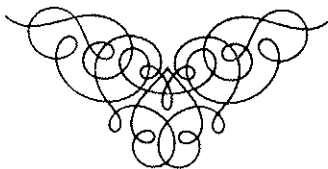
I've always had to fight.
Struggle for everything I've achieved,
And every fighter needs a fortress
Into which to retreat.
The Starfleet officer and the child
Who had to scratch and claw to survive
Are aspects of the same person,
Distanced only by time,
And time is relative.

Even in the haven of this ship and its family.
I need my barriers.
They're part of me;
An essential element in the survival package.

Thank you.
For the love. For the gentleness and joy.
I hope you understand.
I chose you, wise yet innocent, for your capacity to understand.

"I'll only say this once -
It never happened."

Sue Meek



SAY GOODBYE TO IT ALL

by

Lorraine Goodison

Beverly Crusher stared at the message on her viewscreen, reading and re-reading the words which somehow refused to enter her mind past the short-term memory stage. It was like a bolt from the blue; she couldn't take it in. She might have remained in her stunned stupor for hours had not a visitor interrupted the daze.

"Beverly, do you have a moment? I wanted to - " Deanna Troi paused, frowning slightly at Crusher's air of absorption. "Are you all right?" she questioned.

Dr. Crusher roused herself, blinking rapidly as she rose from limbo. "Mmm? Yes. Yes, I'm... quite all right."

"Is it bad news?"

"No, just unexpected. I've been offered a new post."

"Oh?" Troi's eyebrows rose slightly.

"Head of Starfleet Medicine," Crusher told her flatly.

Delight spread across Troi's expressive face and she advanced to her friend's side. "Beverly, congratulations! What a wonderful surprise!" She paused, tuning in to the conflicting emotions Beverly Crusher was broadcasting. "You're not happy about it."

Crusher grimaced and shrugged. "I don't know! It's so sudden! I've spent the past ten minutes staring at the screen. I really don't know what to think."

"Then be glad for yourself," Troi said softly, lightly touching Crusher's arm. "It's a marvellous opportunity."

"Then why aren't I swinging from the ceiling, broadcasting it through the ship?"

"I think you know the reasons."

Crusher nodded, shaking her head slightly. "It's going to be a big change."

"Have you told Wesley?"

"Deanna, it's barely sunk in! I'll... tell him later."

"And the Captain?"

Another shrug, a glance away. "Oh, he probably knows. I can't see Starfleet offering his CMO a post like this and not mentioning it."

"Still..." pressed Troi, understanding her reluctance.

"I know, I know!" Crusher turned away, taking the message tab from the drive and staring at it as if it held the doom of ages. "There's so much to do..." she murmured. "It's too sudden. I can't just -"

"Yes you can," Troi interrupted firmly, moving to where she could see the doctor's face. "You have to think of what's best for you."

Doubt was written clear on Crusher's face as she met Deanna's gaze. "What if I don't know?"

Some eighty minutes passed before Dr. Crusher pushed herself into going to see Picard. Her tension built with every step she took and as she paused outside his Ready Room she took a deep breath.

"This is ridiculous," she chided herself, unaware of Data's questioning glance. She heard Picard's voice acknowledging the door chime and entered, to be greeted by an enquiring look as the Captain glanced up.

"Dr. Crusher. What can I do for you?"

At least he's in an amiable mood, she thought irrationally. She gestured with the message tab. "I thought you should know - I've been offered the post of Head of Starfleet Medicine."

Was there a momentary hesitation, a glimpse of sorrow in his eyes? She wasn't sure. Deanna was the one for reading people, not her, and Jean-Luc Picard was harder to fathom than most.

"Well, I won't say I'm enamoured at the thought of breaking in a new CMC, but -" Picard rose, his hand outstretched. "Congratulations, Doctor. It's well deserved."

She returned the firm grip, feeling a strange remoteness. "I haven't accepted yet."

"It's a big step, but I'm sure you'll do well. Does... ah... does Wesley know?"

"Not yet."

Picard smiled. "Then don't let me keep you from breaking the news."

Crusher blinked at the quiet dismissal - or was she being over-sensitive? She opened her mouth to put words to her inner feelings, and found she could not. "I'll... let you know when my leaving date comes through."

Picard's eyes strayed to the desk screen and back to her. "Fine," he said affably, taking his seat once more. He watched her leave, staring pensively at the closed doors for some time after.

Walking along the corridor, Beverly Crusher found indignation and disappointment churning inside her. There she was, all keyed up, and all she got was "Congratulations" and "It's a big step". No

"I'll miss you" or "Do you have to go?" The empty turbolift admitted her as her anger exploded into verbal expression.

"Who the hell does he think he is?"

"Floor?" enquired the quiet computer voice.

"Oh - Deck 3 quarters."

A flicker of light signalled movement and she slowly brought her breathing under control. She unclenched her hands, slightly alarmed at her reaction.

"Who the hell do I think I am?" she asked herself softly.
"What did I expect?"

Something, she answered herself ruefully. *Anything*. *A sign that my leaving will do more than cause a slight hiccup in his daily routine.*

The lift came to its destination and she stepped out, clamping down her feelings with practised ease.

Wesley greeted her news with somewhat more enthusiasm. Eyes agog, jaw hanging towards the floor, he stared at her as if she had somehow metamorphosed into something different. "Head of - Mom, that's... that's... I don't know what to say!"

"You might say you're happy for your old mother," she told him wryly.

"Of course I am!" Wesley gave her a wide grin, reaching out to grasp the hands she offered.

A pang of regret stabbed the doctor. Time was, he would have thrown his arms about her. *When did he become so circumspect, so... adult?* She held his gaze, putting voice to the direct consequences of her posting. "It'll mean leaving the Enterprise."

Wesley sobered, seriousness dulling his expressive face. He nodded. "I know."

She breathed deeply, plunging into the sea of whys and wherefores, wondering as she did so why she was justifying her good fortune. "I've worked towards this all my life, Wes. It'll never come again. I know you'll miss being here, but you'd have to leave sooner or later. On Earth you'll have a better chance to study, more friends..."

"Don't worry about me, Mom," he cut in quickly. "Did you think I'd let you go alone?"

She shook her head, smiling at her man-child. "No, I didn't."

Wesley's grin returned. He broke their contact, grimacing in apology. "I've gotta go. Class starts in ten minutes."

His mother nodded, stifling a desire to ruffle his carefully combed hair as he turned to leave. He was so serious sometimes... With Wesley gone, the room seemed too empty for comfort, and her thoughts weighed heavily. She headed for Sickbay, where she could lose herself in reports.

After the initial reaction to the news, the shipboard routine continued much as before. There were things to be finished, of course, reports to be written up, results recorded, files brought up to date, but Dr. Crusher found her time filled, preventing her from dwelling over much on her move.

Initial doubts were quickly forgotten with the confirmation of the posting and firm dates to leave the Enterprise. Suddenly there didn't seem to be enough time. She helped Picard vet the applications for her position, centering her energies on finding a worthy successor. There was no shortage of experienced personnel clamouring to fill the prestige post, but one in particular brought a smile to Beverly Crusher's lips.

"Katherine Pulaski." She scanned the details on the desk screen, matching personal knowledge with recorded merit.

Picard glanced up, one eyebrow cocked. "You know her?"

Crusher nodded. "Mmmm. A real character and an excellent doctor."

"Humph.." The noise indicated Picard's feelings about 'characters'. If there was one thing he disliked, it was a 'personality' who threatened to disrupt his smoothly-run ship.

Dr. Crusher hid her smile and looked pointedly at him. "She is extremely well qualified and an expert in several fields. She's served on the Hood, the Excalibur and the Berlin."

"Tends to move about a lot," commented Picard, transferring his attention to his notes.

"Every one of those captains was sorry to see her go," Crusher continued, trying not to sound too anxious to push Pulaski's case. "There are letters of commendation from all of them." She paused, waiting for a reaction. When none was forthcoming, she pressed on. "I'd certainly consider her an ideal replacement."

That got the captain's attention. He glanced up, an indefinable expression on his face. "That's your professional opinion."

"It is. She's my recommendation for CMO."

Picard nodded. "Mmm, but we'd better give the others an equal chance." He looked away, missing the flash of irritation which crossed Crusher's face.

They worked on, passing the afternoon in detached professional companionship which left no opportunity for either to voice their inner feelings about the imminent departure. Crusher bit down on her feelings, telling herself she had no right to expect anything from Jean-Luc Picard, much less an acknowledgement of currents she wasn't sure he was even aware of. Surely he would have said something by now?

Picard, for his part, chose silence because it seemed the pertinent thing to do. It would be foolish to stumble awkwardly into a situation they had never discussed and he was not sure even existed. Where was the sense of digging up unspoken emotions, probing old wounds?

He glanced over to her bowed head, recognising the spark of attraction her presence engendered. He had never allowed that spark a chance to flame; partly out of respect to Jack Crusher's memory, partly because Beverly had never signalled a wish to develop their relationship beyond professional contact. Oh, a certain relaxation had overtaken their first wariness, they could even joke, but they were as unaware of each other's needs as the day she first came on board. Jack's death was a wall between them, and Wesley the physical guard of that barrier. Given time, who knew, but time had run out.

Suppressing a sigh, Picard turned his attention to his work. That, at least, was something he could deal with.

No farewell parties, Crusher had told Troi firmly, knowing the Counselor would tactfully spread the news to those concerned. She could not avoid the medical staff send-off, but she managed to keep it to a good-humoured incident. As the departure date loomed, she closed into herself more than usual, avoiding those who might make her regret her decision.

Wesley could not be avoided.

"It'll be better for you," she said, stuffing shoes into a corner of the case. "There'll be so much to organise, I won't have time to see to our new home properly."

"I don't mind, Mom, honest."

"I'd rather it was ready for you," Crusher continued, determined on her course. "It's going to be such an upheaval as it is, and I'll spend the first few weeks just finding out what I'm doing. You'd be on your own, Wesley."

"I don't mind, really," he protested, torn between his wish to go with his mother and his elation at being on the Enterprise a little longer than expected.

"I know." She paused, meeting his gaze. "We won't be apart for long, Wes. Besides, it'll give you a chance to finish your projects."

He nodded, downcast, and she left the case to go to him, grasping his shoulders tightly. Her eyes sparkled with unshed tears and she told him, "I'm very proud of you, did you know that?"

"I'm proud of you, Mom," he said gravely, a boy growing into manhood with painful understanding.

"That's good to know. Now where did I put that other case...?"

There was a small group waiting to see her off then when the Enterprise reached Starbase 102. From there she would transfer to a ship heading Earthwards and after that, the new adventure really began.

Deanna came forward first, her deep dark eyes radiating understanding and warmth. "Good luck, Beverly," she said, clasping her friend's hands. "Happiness in all you do."

That last comment came close to undoing Crusher's carefully-built reserve and she embraced Troi awkwardly, reflecting that she'd not had much practice at this.

They parted, and it was the turn of the man waiting patiently to the side, the man who stood behind a mask of well-prepared good wishes. Their eyes met, and Dr. Crusher found herself wishing she could ask Deanna what she felt from Picard.

The Captain stepped forward, genuine warmth in his smile as he folded both his hands round hers. "You've only been with us a few months, but you'll leave quite a gap. We - I - will miss you, Beverly."

She smiled half-heartedly. *Damn you, she thought, why couldn't you have told me so before now? Would it have been so difficult?*

"Mom... "

Wesley was there, and her chance to speak to Picard was gone. Distracted, she gazed fondly at her son. "Don't grow any more," she warned him. "I want to be able to look you in the eye when you get to Earth."

"I'll try not to," grinned Wesley.

"And be good. Do what you're told."

"Mom... "

She smiled. "I'll miss you."

"Likewise."

A signal chirped on the console and the operator reported, "Ready for beam-down, Captain."

Beverly Crusher acknowledged Picard's glance with a small nod. She looked again at her son. "Are Acting Ensigns allowed to give their mothers a hug goodbye?"

With a laugh, Wesley flung his arms around her. As they stood in the tight embrace, Crusher felt a stone sink in her soul. Her eyes searched for and caught Picard's, and she silently passed responsibility for her son's well-being on to him.

She reluctantly broke the grip. "Gotta go, Wes."

He was struggling to hold back his tears. "Yeah... g'by, Mom."

"See you soon."

She stepped onto the transporter platform, feeling as if a chapter in her life had closed forever. The forcefield took hold and her son's image dissolved before her eyes.

The new Head of Starfleet Medicine had much to do when she finally arrived at Medical HQ, and time passed quickly, streaming by in a mish-mash of new faces and mental exhaustion. She barely had time to think of herself, much less Wesley, but the hologram of him stood on her desk next to one of herself and Jack, and every so often she looked at them for comfort.

She was ill-prepared when a call came through one fraught, work-filled afternoon. Assuming it was another doctor bringing to

her attention something she didn't want to know in the first place, she did not at first register the call.

The name pierced her thoughts, and she frowned at the operator. "Pardon?"

"A call from Ensign Wesley Crusher on board the USS Enterprise. Will you accept?"

"Yes! Yes, of course!" With impatience building she waited as the screen fuzzed, then an aching familiar face appeared. "Wes?"

"Hi, Mom!"

"Hi yourself. This is quite a surprise."

Wesley shrugged. "Just thought I'd call. How is the new job?"

She ran a hand through her hair, smiling wearily. "Exhausting, but satisfying. You know how it is - everyone keeps their problems and grumbles for the new guy. So - what are you up to? I expected to hear from you sooner."

"Oh." Wesley's face clouded briefly. "We - uh - we got delayed."

"Tell me something new. The day a starship runs from A to B without a detour will be a miracle." She leaned forward, wishing she could reach across the desk to touch him. It felt so good to hear from him again. "Can you talk about it, or is it classified?"

Wesley seemed doubtful, but after hesitating he explained. "We had to help the Rachellis system. You know, where they've got the Plasma Plague."

Dr. Crusher nodded, ignoring the chill that ran through her bones. She'd known a starship was diverted to help the Rachellis problem, but not that it was the Enterprise. "It worked out okay?" she prompted.

Wesley nodded, they blurted out, "And Deanna was pregnant!"

"What?"

"It was weird! One minute she was okay, and the next, she had a baby, and he grew up real quick and - "

"Wes," interrupted his mother, "I think this is something you should keep for later, huh? How did you get permission for this, anyway?"

"Oh, Captain Picard pulled a few strings," Wesley told her with blithe disregard for protocol. "And he says 'Hi'."

Crusher submerged a smile. "I'm sure he does..." she murmured. She gazed at her child. "So when are you due to leave? It can't be long now. I think you'll like our new home. It's got a marvellous view and - " She trailed off, struck by his silence. Foreboding filled her heart. "Wes?"

"Mom, I..." He swallowed, squaring his shoulders in unconscious imitation of Will Riker. "I'm not coming to Earth," he admitted in a rush. "I'm staying here."

"Wes... "

Wesley plunged on, committed to his confession. "I thought about it a lot and I want to stay on the Enterprise. Captain Picard says I can and everyone is going to - "

"Hold on, back-track a little," his mother demanded incredulously. "*Picard* says you can? Who does he - "

"If you agree," Wesley quickly reassured her. "He says he'll abide by your wishes."

"Oh he does, does he?"

Wesley anxiously watched his mother, waiting for her approval. "Mom? It's okay, isn't it? I mean - "

"Wesley, I think that decision's been made already," Crusher told him tiredly.

"Hub?"

She sighed, stilling the desire to reach out to him. "You've made an adult decision, Wes. Of course I agree. Did you think I'd deny you your chance when I've taken mine?"

A wide smile replaced the anxiety. "Thanks, Mom! I knew you'd say that."

Her smile was wavering but she hoped he would not notice. "I'll see you when you enter the Academy. It'll just be a little longer, that's all."

"That's what I figured. Guinan said - well, it doesn't matter what she said." He paused, glancing off-screen at something. "Listen, Mom - I have to go. I just wanted to make sure it was okay."

"Sure, Wes. Take care of yourself, and - get in touch again soon."

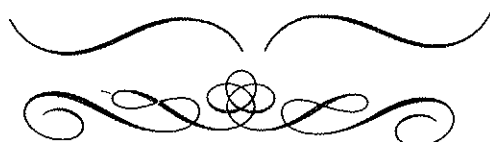
"I will, promise. Bye, Mom!"

"Bye. Wes - I love you."

The screen fuzzed, leaving her doubtful if he heard her last words. Her eyes filled, the pain a physical agony. Her fingers touched the screen. "Damn..." she whispered, feeling the anger grow within her. What right did Picard have to take her boy? He'd taken Jack, did he have to take Wesley as well?

She shuddered, deep racking sobs choking her throat. Her hands clenched as she stared blindly at the blank screen. "Damn you, Jean-Luc," she whispered furiously. "Damn you to hell!"

And she cried as she had never cried before, screaming inside with agonising, hurtful loss.



CAPTAIN'S NIGHTMARE

There are kids in the corridors and kids in the lifts
Kids on the holo-decks, they're all over the ship
So he runs to the Bridge where life is serene
Then he sees Wesley Crusher and lets out a scream.

"Tut tut," says Doc Crusher (called Bev by our champ)
That's my son you're upsetting, not an ordinary scamp.
"Oh dear!" says our Captain (attaining his throne)
"Can't he play somewhere else, and leave me alone?"

"Well, I've redesigned the engines, and redrawn the plans
And there's nothing on the Bridge that I don't understand.
Force fields my specialty! I'll perform any task -
If there's anything you need, sir - you just have to ask!"

"Oh boy!" sighs our boss as he nurses his head,
"I think I'll give up and just go back to bed."
"Oh no you don't!" says our Bev in a storm.
"A headache you have so more tests I'll perform."

With a gnash and a gnarl and much grinding of teeth
Our captain explodes and leaps out of his seat.
"I've had it to here!" yells our hero at last.
"Well, that's more than I've had!" yells Beverly, aghast.

"Had what?" says our Data - "Don't ask," whispers Worf.
"Oh shit!" says Will Riker (but Tasha retorts)
"Well a man's got to do what any man should;
If the Captain needs help then I'm sure I could."

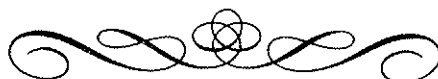
Then up jumps young Crusher saying, "What's wrong with me?"
"Now where shall I start?" says the ship's Number Three.
This sets Will a-giggling, Jean-Luc's not amused;
He has a strong feeling he's being abused.

The Bridge crew are happy, they're all having fun
'Till Bev tells our hero that Wesley's his son.
The crew dive for cover, they spread far and wide
Except poor old Data - he's nowhere to hide!

"No way! Dr. Crusher can that child be mine.
I know what goes where, and *I didn't that time.*"
"Only joking," trills Bev, "I was just being bad."
Then they all reappear and start calling him Dad.

Enough is enough, our Captain gives in.
The crew win again, it's a terrible sin.
He looks up at Wes - with a smile he is met -
He smiles back in protest - he'll get them back yet!

Lesley McCartney



The Adventures of Riker and Data

"The Swimming Lesson"

Now Data,
for our first
lesson I am
going to teach
you the dive.

Now
Dive!

SPLASH

Pool after 600 lb
android has dived in.

Frame - Gary '88

LINK

by

Teresa Abbott

They came through time and space, their mind-voices joining across the void to assist the one who had called for their help. Gently they questioned him.

'You allowed a lie to remain uncorrected?' There was no censure or reproach in their voices, just a lack of comprehension, a desire to understand.

The one who had summoned them answered: 'I did not at the time perceive it as a lie. The earlier contact had been unsuccessful, and I did not think it necessary to mention it. Now I am concerned as to whether or not I did the right thing.'

They answered him in unison. 'Let us share your past with you then, so that we will know what to advise.'

Gratefully, he opened up his mind to them, letting them share the memory.

* * * * *

Even before he felt the ground solidify beneath him, he knew the transference had gone wrong. There had been disturbing fluctuations in the energy field, and the damp earth below him was certainly not what he would have expected to find at his intended destination.

Opening his eyes, he took in his surroundings with interest.

He was lying in what appeared to be a leafy glade. The sunlight broke in shafts through the thick tree cover overhead, but made little impact on a forest floor covered in ferns and dense, matted undergrowth. It could have been one of a thousand different planets in a hundred different galaxies, and he knew that there were not enough clues here to tell him where he was, or even when he was. Reluctantly he admitted to himself that he had been foolhardy to attempt a crossing in his already weakened state. Slowly sitting up, he glanced around, and seeing no sign of life ran a quick mental scan over his bodily functions.

The results were sufficient to unnerve even him a little. He knew he would have to rest for some time before he would be strong enough to attempt the Journey again. Unfortunately, this place did not seem to offer much in the way of shelter or sustenance.

It was then he saw the child.

The boy stood in the shadow of a tree not six feet away and watched him with unconcealed fascination. Their eyes met, and for a long moment neither of them moved.

The adult felt surprise stir within him, for he had not felt

the child's presence, and it was rare to find such strong mental shielding in one so young.

The boy was also transfixed by his unexpected find. Above all else by the stranger's eyes, which although they appeared grey at a quick glance, were really no colour at all if you looked closely for long enough.

Finally the boy broke the silence. There was no fear in his voice, just curiosity.

"Who are you? You are not from this planet."

The stranger attempted a smile. "How do you know?"

The child was indignant. "Because I have studied all the life forms on this planet, and you are not one of them."

With an effort the stranger stood up and faced the boy across the clearing.

"Please do not be afraid of me. I will not harm you. I am just... a Traveller, passing this way on a long journey. As you can see, I have become unwell, and I need to rest. Will you tell me what place this is, and who you are?"

The boy stepped towards him and looked up at him, unafraid.

"This is the planet Alvira," he answered, "and I am Spock."

It was growing dark. Or as dark as it would ever be on this tri-lunar world. Amanda stood by the window watching the forest outside, and told herself firmly for the thousandth time that it was illogical to worry.

Firstly, the survey party prior to colonisation had spent months cataloguing the various life forms, and there were no predators.

Secondly, Sarek would never have left them alone were he not assured of their safety. Indeed, if she had any worries, she had only to activate the personal transmitter in the other room, and her husband would be here with her in a matter of hours.

Still, she had spent many long winter evenings as a child listening to stories at her grandmother's knees. Tales of how, even on Earth long ago, a child could not always walk safely alone.

The strangeness of the forest outside stirred deep racial memories, and her conscious mind could not stop her from waiting, as generations of mothers had before her, for the safe return of her child.

Spock had been very ill for a while. Even now, her heart contracted painfully within her, remembering how close her only child had come to death.

When he had first been born, she had been warned by the doctors that such an alien hybrid might not survive, and had mentally prepared herself for the disaster of his death.

Over the years, however, she had watched her son grow tall and strong. Now, at ten years old, he was almost as tall as she was, and they had all become complacent about his health and survival.

The virus on Starbase 3 had struck without warning. Both she and Sarek, visiting the base on government business, had become unwell, but had soon recovered. Spock, for some reason, had fallen seriously ill, and for several weeks the doctors had despaired of his life. Taking the child back to Vulcan was out of the question, for fear that the long journey might tire and further weaken him.

Finally, when at last Spock seemed a little better, Amanda had begged Sarek to get them away from the base, with its mechanised, impersonal surroundings, instinctively feeling that the child needed to convalesce in different surroundings.

Sarek had found them Alvira. A fairly recently discovered planet, it was within easy reach of the base, and though not desert-like, the climate was warm, and the environment undisturbed.

There were several colonies of scientists there, studying the life forms prior to full-scale colonisation.

Sarek decided that with his son's life at stake, it was logical to pull a few ambassadorial strings.

Amanda and Spock were given the use of a large house in the forest, within easy reach of one of the settlements. The privacy would ensure that Spock wouldn't be exposed to any more infections. The transmitter meant that they would not have to worry about obtaining supplies or asking for assistance if necessary.

The change in atmosphere had indeed helped Spock, as her maternal instincts had told her it would. Within a week the child was strong enough to explore the forest, curious as ever about the new surroundings. As if aware that she needed reassurance, he would frequently return, so she had no fears for his safety.

Today, however, Spock had left at daybreak, and she had not seen him at all since then.

Just as she was about to call the settlement, to see if anyone there had seen the child, she saw him come into the clearing in front of the house.

She drew in her breath sharply in surprise as she saw that Spock, who would rarely let even his mother touch him, was leading calmly by the arm a tall, thin stranger.

Much later that evening, mother and son sat alone in front of the log fire in the main room. The stranger had been so weak that Amanda had barely managed to get him into the bed in the spare room before he had seemed instantly asleep.

Spock had said only that the visitor was someone 'passing through', who was in distress and needed their help. Confused by her son's support for the stranger, she had insisted that they contact the settlement and inform them of the unauthorised arrival. At this, to her surprise, Spock had become unusually agitated, rightly pointing out that Sarek would be annoyed if he thought his son had mixed with strangers so soon after his illness, and might

take them away.

Reluctantly, Amanda allowed herself to be swayed by Spock's animation, and promised she would not call the settlement until they had had the chance to question their guest.

As Spock turned to leave for his bedroom, Amanda could not prevent herself from asking the question that had been bothering her all evening.

"Spock, how is it that touching the stranger did not trouble you in any way?"

The boy was thoughtful, considering the question.

His answer only served to increase her anxiety.

"When I touched him, Mother, I felt nothing from him. It was as if he wasn't really there at all."

Events the next day did little to alleviate her fears. The stranger was polite and well-mannered, and did nothing that would have alarmed her. He drank a little water but refused all food, saying merely that he needed to rest. When questioned, he only repeated what Spock had already told her. He was a Traveller, one who spent his life journeying from one place to the next, in an attempt to learn as much as possible about all things. He meant them no harm and would not stay for more than a day.

Why, then, did she feel so threatened by his presence?

She analysed her own feelings, and knew that she was not so petty as to be jealous of the obvious pleasure the stranger and Spock got from each other's company.

The two of them spent many hours talking in the room in which the Traveller was resting, and once, with an unexplained shiver of apprehension, she thought she heard her deadly serious son laugh.

There was another thing that worried her.

Although she believed she knew all the life forms on the planet, increasingly she thought she saw ghosts, or phantoms, in the woods. There was no other word to describe them; vague flickerings out of the corner of her eye. A feeling of being watched. Yet when she turned, there was never anything there.

At first she thought she was sickening again. There was no mention in the records of any such phenomenon. But the feelings had been growing by the hour and she could no longer contain her unease.

Hoping that Sarek would not dismiss her fears as illogical, Amanda finally activated the transmitter and called her husband.

The Traveller and the boy sat together on the porch. Their conversation had ranged over everyday matters such as mathematics and computer science, and then onto tales of the more exotic places in the known universe. They sat now in companionable silence, content to rest and watch the darkening forest.

Eventually the Traveller stirred. "Tell me," he asked the child, "why do you shield your mind so strongly?"

Spock answered without embarrassment.

"It is because of the others in the forest. I cannot see them properly, but their mind-voices confuse my thoughts if I allow my shields to drop. Do you hear them too?"

"Of course." The adult smiled. "I can see them as well as hear them."

"What are they?" The boy was curious.

The Traveller considered for a moment. "I think they are a very primitive form of energy creature, drawing their power from the lines of force in and around the planet. They resonate between matter and energy, and their thoughts are immature and confused. They are semi-telepathic, but have not yet learned how to communicate effectively.

"They are the true native inhabitants of this planet, and in time, if left alone, they will develop into a mature, telepathic species."

"Why is there no record of them in the scientists' findings?" asked Spock.

"Probably, when the settlers first arrived, the creatures were afraid and blended into the energy fields around the planet. Sensors would not detect them there. Now that they have learned that the people occupy a different reality and can co-exist with them, they are coming back to reclaim their home. I doubt whether most humanoids would even be aware of them. One such as yourself, from a planet with greater mental disciplines, might notice them. Or someone who had received a measure of mental training. Most would not see or feel anything. Will you tell your father about them when he returns?"

"Of course. It is Federation policy not to interfere with primitive races, but to allow them to develop in their own way. This planet may need to be evacuated. Perhaps, as I am to be a scientist like my father, he will let me help to investigate them."

The Traveller chose his next words carefully.

"Have you ever considered, Spock, that becoming a scientist is not the only avenue open to you? Many people can do experiments, but there is a universe to explore, and maybe your future will lie other than in the laboratory."

Spock allowed himself a small smile.

"You obviously do not know my father. I do not think that he would ever entertain such an idea."

The Traveller was thoughtful. "Perhaps I should speak to your father before I leave this planet. Now that I am stronger, there are matters I must attend to, and in a little while I must leave this house. But tomorrow I will come back and speak to your mother, and maybe she will allow me to speak with your father."

Spock was quiet. "Must you go? How do I know you will

return?" He asked the question reluctantly, knowing it revealed emotion unseemly for a Vulcan child.

The Traveller smiled gently. "I have never yet broken a promise. I give you my word that I will come back."

Amanda came into the room to find Spock staring out of the open window, but his gaze was on a point far beyond that of the forest outside.

"He's gone, then." An immense relief jostled with her annoyance that the stranger had not considered it necessary to thank her personally for their hospitality.

Spock turned to face her. "He has some matters he must attend to. But he will be back tomorrow to speak with you and father."

"Speak to us about what?" She could not understand the wall of antagonism that seemed to have sprung up between them. She expected the boy to say he didn't know, but Spock merely turned away, and she knew he had done so to avoid telling her a direct lie.

Amanda was immeasurably glad, then, that she had after all contacted Sarek. And she knew she would not tell Spock that when the Traveller returned in the morning, there would be no-one there for him to speak to.

The Traveller did indeed have matters to attend to.

He had recovered sufficiently to be able to contemplate resuming his journey. However, his last experience had made him wary of making the attempt in anything less than a state of perfect fitness. The day's rest had almost done the trick, but for the final stages of healing, he would need complete privacy.

For several hours he made his way deep into the forest until he found a place offering the necessary seclusion. Sitting cross-legged on the ground he cast around himself a protective energy shield. Only then did he feel safe to sink into the deep trance necessary to finally perfect the energy fields within his body.

When, some hours later, he snapped back to consciousness, he knew immediately that the woman had outsmarted him.

The drone of engines carried clearly through the night air, and though a stranger to the galaxy, he had no doubts as to the reason behind the unknown craft's arrival.

It would take him too long to get back to the house on foot. He would have to ask for help at the settlement, which was nearer.

Pushing through the trees, a part of his mind still wrestled with indecision. Did he have the right to go after the boy? The path he was advocating for the child was a hard, and maybe lonely, one. Yet he could not bear to think of such gifts going to waste in some dull laboratory. And surely one with such special gifts as Spock possessed would find equally gifted friends with whom to share his life's Journey?

After all, he was not proposing to interfere, but merely to suggest, to encourage. Surely that was within the boundaries of what he was allowed to do?

Having justified to himself his decision, he realised that there would be no time, after all, to contact the settlers. The people there would ask too many questions, and precious minutes would be lost. Standing on the hillside overlooking the settlement, he realised that most of the inhabitants were already asleep.

In a fenced-in enclosure on the edge of the buildings were several gurami, primitive horse-like creatures that the scientists used for transport into the dense forests.

All three moons had risen, and the animals seemed to glow green-gold in the semi-darkness. He noticed with relief that one appeared to be still harnessed. It was but a matter of minutes to concentrate his thoughts on the mind of that creature, and compel it to jump free of the enclosure and come towards him. The concept of theft did not exist in his mind. He knew he was only borrowing the animal and would send it back as soon as possible.

He rode with haste through the moonlit forest. There was no sign of life save for the occasional fluttering of a startled bird, and the continual shifting of the mind-creatures through the trees.

The child's mother was obviously more perceptive than he had given her credit for. She must have guessed, if only subconsciously, that he had the power to open Spock's mind to new horizons, and acted instinctively to prevent the possibility of a future rift in the family.

As his mount broke out of the forest into the clearing around the house, he knew immediately that it was too late, and that he had lost the chance to influence the boy.

Immensely saddened by the thought that Spock would feel betrayed, he tried to communicate with the primitive mind creatures, to leave a message that he had indeed returned, in case the family should one day come back.

But the creatures, having already swarmed all over the house in the Human's absence, either did not want, or were unable to, understand him.

He had finally ridden back to the settlement, defeated, knowing he had lost the boy.

* * * * *

His fellow Travellers withdrew and he was once again alone.

'That is why, when the Human Riker asked me had there been any previous contacts, I told him no. I had been unable to influence the parents to encourage their special child, and felt I had failed. The contact was unsuccessful.'

'It was also because of Amanda's reaction to me that I did not want Wesley's mother told of his gifts. It seemed that the maternal instinct to protect can sometimes stand in the way of greatness.'

The spokesman for the others answered. 'We have pooled our joint knowledge of this galaxy's history, and find that the one

called Spock did indeed fulfil his destiny. He grew to become a legend in his own time, and with his companions did much to advance the cause of interstellar exploration.

'Perhaps there is a force greater than ours that controls these things. Who can say why, of all the planets in the known galaxies, your broken journey should have taken you to Alvira, on one of the few days that Spock was there.'

The Traveller was dismayed. 'Then I must somehow put the record straight. It would be wrong to allow Humanity to go on believing that I hadn't tried. What must I do?'

But the others were already withdrawing.

'You must find your own answer,' they replied.

He scanned through time and space, searching for the solution. He would have to find someone whose mind he could influence to record the incident. It would have to be someone whose words would be read and remembered, but not in the same time or place, as the clues would be too obvious, and might change history if found too soon.

He would leave just his name, and enough of a description of the planet so that one who searched would find him.

And he would leave a message for Spock, to tell him that he had not broken his word, and had returned as promised.

Having finally settled on the time and place, he gathered himself for yet another journey.

ADDENDUM: Entry in computer memory banks, history/literature division, item AC10032951/L. Old 20th century poem: author Walter de la Mare.

"Is there anybody there?" said the Traveller,
Knocking on the moonlit door;
And his horse in the silence champed the grasses
Of the forest's ferny floor;
And a bird flew up out of the turret
Above the Traveller's head;
And he smote upon the door again a second time;
"Is there anybody there?" he said.
But no one descended to the Traveller;
No head from the leaf-fringed sill
Leaned over and looked into his grey eyes
Where he stood perplexed and still.
But only a host of phantom Listeners
That dwelt in the lone house then
Stood listening in the quiet of the moonlight
To that voice from the world of men:
Stood thronging the faint moonbeams on the dark stair
That goes down to the empty hall,
Harkening in an air stirred and shaken
By the lonely Traveller's call.
And he felt in his heart their strangeness,
Their stillness answering his cry,

While his horse moved, cropping the dark turf
'Neath the starred and leafy sky.
For he suddenly smote on the door, even
Louder, and lifted his head.
"Tell them I came, and no one answered,
That I kept my word," he said.
Never the least stir made the Listeners,
Though every word he spake
Fell echoing through the shadowiness of the still house
From the one man left awake:
Aye, they heard his foot upon the stirrup,
And the sound of iron on stone,
And how the silence surged softly backwards
When the plunging hoofs were gone.

